



A.E. HOUSMAN'S POETRY : A REASSESSMENT

**ABSTRACT
THESIS**

SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF

Doctor of Philosophy

IN

ENGLISH

BY

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Topic : A.E. Housman's Poetry:

A Reassessment

A cursory glance at the small output shows that Housman may not rank with major Victorian poets with respect to the emotional intensity and thematic variety of their verse. But he can justifiably be called a poet who communicates with utmost verbal directness. Since he has never been rated as a major figure, he has, perhaps, not received the amount of critical attention which, for example, Hopkins did. But the fact that outstanding critics like Edmund Wilson, Randall Jarrell, William Empson, Christopher Ricks, F.W. Bateson, and Cleanth Brooks have commented on his poetry, clearly indicates that his verse has its own kind of poetic excellence. The present study entitled *A.E. Housman's Poetry: A Reassessment* aims at studying the major themes of Housman's poetry. Since his death in 1936 Housman's character and personality have attracted more critical attention than his poetry.

Housman's poetry has often been praised by his critics for its simplicity of form and meaning. Apparently it does not seem to offer any difficulty. But there is enough truth in what J.P. Bishop has remarked about this simplicity when he says that despite an apparent clarity such that almost any poem seems ready to deliver its meaning at once, there is always something that is not clear, something not brought into the open, something that is left in doubt. Like the classical philosophers, Epicurus and Lucritus, Housman believed that the human fear of death prevents any real and productive means of existence. An examination of his poetry reveals the manner in which he employs the tenets of atomic theory

to demonstrate the vacuous nature of human life in an enduring face of death.

Housman in his poems such as "Loveliest of Trees", explicitly expresses his belief that an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to experience it more intensely. His poem "Reveille" is a call for action and involvement in youth before death closes the opportunity for action. In many of Housman's poems, however, the recognition of transience and decay leads to the desire for the release of death rather than a more meaningful participation in life. It is the second element of the theme that has led many critics to dismiss Housman as a bitter pessimist who exposes the tragic side of life. However, a careful analysis of the poems in which these two aspects of the theme appear casts some doubt on this conclusion. It is clear, in fact, in examining the view of life contained in "Loveliest of Trees" that to regard Housman merely as a pessimist is to oversimplify a more complex attitude.

Some other critics, however, find that Housman answers the question of life and death in contradictory ways. *A Shropshire Lad* is based on the human dilemma of life and death, and this dilemma can be resolved only in paradoxical terms. To be fully understood it must be seen in relation to the concern with permanence and change, and innocence and experience, which lies at the heart of the work. In his 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and Earlier Hardy* defends himself against the charge of pessimism. Housman had similar problem and made his own attempts to distance himself from the charge of pessimism. For instance, in his letter to Houston Martin Housman writes that pessimism is 'silly' and himself is a peyorist as opposed to a meliorist.

It is possible that both these writers would have embraced pessimism, but they did not want to be thought of as people who could only see the dark side of things. They both wanted to make it clear that they had arrived at their positions after due consideration of the evidence; as Housman pointed out in the letter to Houston Martin that he arrived at his peiorism owing to his observation of the world, not to personal circumstances.

The discussion of the theme of soldiering evinces that Housman was greatly fascinated by soldiering and the accidents of military life. The most important source for Housman's compassion for the desperate young soldier was his youngest brother, Herbert. Herbert's battalion took part in the Boar War of 1901, and he was killed in action. The fact of his death inspired writing or re-writing of some of Housman's greatest poetry. In a letter to his sister Kate, he wrote that the essential business of poetry was to harmonize the sadness of the universe. Yet publicly, Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War and cynical about its motives.

Duty, friendship, and bravery are the three public or conventional values that Housman expects to find in a soldier. The sacrifices made by soldiers in defending their motherland always won his admiration. Military friendship and community is another important characteristic of Housman's poetry. Many of the lyrics lament friendship broken by death, which is the inevitable fate of Housman's soldier. Courage and stoic endurance are the two constant themes of Housman's poetry. In some of the poems, Housman shows the pain and sorrow certainly involved in the act of dying.

The first poem of *A Shropshire Lad*, “1887”, and “Epitaph for an Army of Mercenaries” have the same subject matter and caused some controversy in their attitude towards war, religion and patriotism.

The tragedy of unrequited love, a symbol perhaps of his own passionate friendship for Moses Jackson, haunts Housman. In many of his love poems, he treats the theme of a heartless mistress who relents too late. Earlier group of Shropshire poems also depict the varied faces of love: the misery of being unloved at the time of loving, the folly of loving that produces only misery, the lover's suicide, the exchange of innocence for experience, faithlessness, etc. Housman's love lyrics emphasize the awareness that love, like life, is fleeting and transient. The earliest love poem, *ASL V* is lighthearted in tone in spite of its theme of love's misfortunes. *ASL VI* treats love as an illness. The nature of love is so transitory that if lover's desires are fulfilled, his love is over, and it is the maiden who must “lie down forlorn”. *ASL XIII* serves as the introduction to a whole group of poems which depict the true transience of love. The five poems that follow deal in more detail with the various stages of the misery of the lad who fails to heed the wise man's advice and give his heart away. In *ASL XIV* the lover's despair is so strong that probably it can never be removed. A comparatively tragic view of love is depicted in later Shropshire poems. The theme of *ASL XXI* (“Bredon Hill”) is the impossibility of permanent love in a world where death is inevitable. The final series of love poems in the Shropshire group (Nos. XXV, XXVI, XXVII) deals with the true pathos of love, for all three poems reveal love's inconstancy by suggesting an endless cycle of lovers forgotten in death and

betrayed by the surviving lovers. ASL XXVII displays pictures the inconstancy of love with the unrealistic situation of a dead lover speaking from the grave. The poem reveals Housman's use of love as a symbol of change. It deals with two kinds of love — the love of a friend and the love of a sweetheart. But neither of the two is fixed and unchanging.

Some of the poems of Housman seem to have been occasioned either by his separation from his closest friend, Moses Jackson, or by some other emotional experience which Housman wanted to hide from his readers. They are naturally characterized by a strong element of ambiguity. This emotional element of Housman's poetry reminds us of what Tennyson said in *In Memoriam* v. 5—6: 'for the unquiet heart and brain, / A use in measured language lies'. In the same context (v. 1—4) Tennyson, measuring his language, confessed:

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

It was his poetry that offered Housman the medium to 'half reveal / and half conceal the Soul within'. Housman wrote from an urgent personal need to find expression for the inexpressible. They are not for the most part 'biographical' in any straightforward sense. But they have a personal element that cannot be ignored. Housman's unrequited love for Moses Jackson lay at the heart of his emotional life and about which it was impossible to silent remain silent. In fact, Housman's poems have an instinct both for revelation and for concealment.

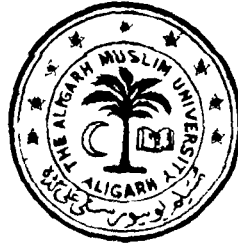
The next important theme of Housman's poetry is exile. Lyric XXXVII ("As Through the Wild Green Hills of Wyre") establishes the shift in setting from Shropshire to London. The theme of estrangement is established in the first four poems of the exile group, for these four poems, more than any other in *A Shropshire Lad* establishes the contrast between the pastoral existence of Shropshire and the exile in London. The poems now look back westward from London to Shropshire, something living in the memory but beyond recovery.

Many of the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* deal with the pleasures of life at its prime and the pain of its dissolution; others show an unconcern for both its pleasures and its pains. The former mood pervades through the Shropshire poems and the latter, through those poems after the exile. Housman depicts in the latter poems of *A Shropshire Lad* an attitude towards life which has a direct relation to the young man's first discovery of his mortality. ASL XXXVII describes the effect of the vanishing of the Shropshire landscape from the sight of Terence as the train carries him to London. Both the loneliness and anxiety of the London poems are also anticipated. In ASL XXXVIII, the persona nostalgically looks back to the west, to Shropshire, from which he has now become estranged. In London, the alien finds himself in a "friendless world." The journey from Shropshire establishes the final break with the world of youth and innocence. The persona has also lost harmony with nature. The three poems which follow bear the same sense of loss and nostalgia because they look back to a land of youth and simplicity. In ASL XL, the memories of youth come from "yon far country" of "blue remembered hills." The memories of

things past is “an air that kills” and the “land of lost content” is Shropshire. ASL XLI “In My Own Shire If I Was Sad,” is based on the contrast between the “homely comforters” of the home shire and the “mortal sickness” of London. The picture of men of London, who “hate their fellow man,” reflects the hostile world where “homely comforters” are substituted by men who “wish you ill.” In ASL LII “Far in a Western Brookland,” the wind which the wanderer hears in the “windless night-time” is the soul of the lad who has forsaken the land of his youth for a barren existence of London. The prevailing mood of *Last Poems* is similar to that of the second half of *A Shropshire Lad*, where the persona broods over his Shropshire youth from a new viewpoint and experiences both the loss and gain involved in the process of change. This exile group of poems contains the paradoxical notion that it was only the illusion that made life meaningful. The mature man, in looking into the past, sees that life held a hope and significance for the young man which he no longer finds. The very act of looking into the past destroys the meaning by revealing the illusion. In brief, this group of exile poems of Housman allows us to share, at least temporarily, the sense of what it means to recognize the passing of youth, the movement from one view of life to another, besides a nostalgic feeling for the place, though imaginatively.

Housman is definitely modern in his attitude towards nature. The essential themes in the nature poetry of the 20th century — fear, horror, loneliness, isolation, paradoxes— are all there in his poetry. Wordsworth used to assert that nature never did betray the heart that loved her. But Housman does not agree with it. According to him, nature is ever indifferent to man. Housman, like

Frost, believed that the external calm and beauty of nature is highly deceptive. Nor is he, like Wordsworth, a poet who has had a vision in youth which he can spend the rest of his life interpreting. Housman's poems tell us of his daily, and one might say, common experience. His earlier poems manifest his lifelong interest in the contemplation of nature by means of careful observation. In these poems, contraries— light and darkness, good and evil— are constantly being set side by side.



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Ref. No.....

Dated 23.9.2008.

This is to certify that Mr. Jalil uddin Ahmed has completed his Ph.D. thesis on **“A.E. Housman’s Poetry: A Reassessment”** under my supervision.

To the best of my knowledge, it is based on the candidate’s own study of the subject and is suitable for submission in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of Ph.D.


(Dr. Rahatullah Khan)

Preface

A.E. Housman(1859-1936),a poet and scholar, was born and brought up in the Bromsgrave area. His first collection of poems *The Shropshire Lad* was published in 1896 and the *Last Poems* in1922. The last collection of poems entitled *More Poems* was published posthumously by his brother Lawrence Housman in 1936. Thus Housman covered a long period of 40 years starting from the Victorian through Georgian to the early 20th century. Since his formative years coincided with the time when Victorian literature was at its highest, the predominant aspect of his poetry too, is the Victorian pessimism. The thematic and emotional range of Housman's poetry may not be as wide as that of Auden and Yeats, but still he deals with motifs closely related to human life and a variety of themes are traceable in his poems. They include, besides pessimism and nature; love, death, soldiering, childhood and exile etc.

A cursory glance at the small output shows that Housman may not rank with major Victorian poets with respect to the emotional intensity and thematic variety of their verse. But he can justifiably be called a poet who communicates with utmost verbal directness. Since he has never been rated as a major figure, he has, perhaps, not received the amount of critical

attention which, for example, Hopkins did. But the fact that outstanding critics like Edmund Wilson, Randall Jarrell, William Empson, Christopher Ricks, F.W. Bateson, and Cleanth Brooks have commented on his poetry, clearly indicates that his verse has its own kind of poetic excellence. The present study entitled *A.E.Housman's Poetry: A Reassessment* aims at studying the major themes of Housman's poetry. Since his death in 1936 Housman's character and personality have attracted more critical attention than his poetry. Critical comments on individual poems are fragmentary and scattered. And moreover, to the best of my knowledge, no attempt till date has been made to discuss all the major themes of Housman's poetry in a single volume. Even studies by the above mentioned critics do not provide a comprehensive treatment of all the major themes. This is the reason because of that I have decided to take up a thematic study of Housman's poetry for my Ph.D. dissertation.

It is a matter of pride and privilege for me to have as my supervisor Dr. Rahatullah Khan, Reader, Department of English, A.M.U., Aligarh. It is only his personal interest, expert guidance and boundless support that has enabled me to complete the work in the present form. I am equally grateful to Prof. Suhail Ahsan, Chairman, Department of English, for his kind help and co-operation in the completion of this work. My deep and sincere

thanks are due to my teachers Prof. Farahatullah Khan and Prof. A.R. Kidwai, for their moral support and wholehearted co-operation during the course of this study.

Thanks are also due to Mr. Jim Page, Director, The Housman Society, and Prof. Brian Rosebury, for their material support and suggestions from time to time. Thanks are also due to Azhar Quddus, (Canada), who made most of the books available to me from abroad through his credit card.

I express my gratitude to my parents, my brothers and sisters, and ^especially my wife Hasna. I am greatly thankful to my elder brother Aftabuddin, who continued to support my aspirations with love, encouragement and guidance at every turn of my life.

Date 23.9.2008.

Aligarh



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Abbreviations

AP- Additional Poems.

ASL- A Shropshire Lad.

LP- Last Poems.

MP- More Poems.

O.B.B. - Oxford Book of Ballads, The

S and R - Sohrab and Rustum.

Chapter- 1

*Introduction:
Biographical and Literary
Background*

Alfred Edward Housman (1859–1936), was born on 26 March 1859 in the Valley House, Fockbury in Worcestershire. His father, Edward Housman, was a solicitor in Bromsgrove. Alfred's mother, Sarah, the daughter of the Reverend John Williams, Rector of nearby Woodchester, was a more gifted person. Alfred was the eldest in a large family. He was followed by Robert in 1860, Clemence in 1861, Katherine in 1862, Basil in 1864, Laurence in 1865 and Herbert in 1868. "There is every sign that Alfred's childhood was happy; and with such an attractive home, a loving intelligent mother and cheerful energetic father ready to share his many enthusiasms with his children, there was a good reason for happiness. The bells of Bromsgrove Church, Laurence recalled in his old age, were a constant background to family life; and the home was strongly Christian, with family prayers before breakfast and church twice on Sundays."¹ But the Housman children also enjoyed considerable freedom. Edward Housman was a man of many interests and he inspired the children to be always doing something. Laurence writes:

There were probably many; but none, I daresay, more interested in itself, when it stood compact and pugnaciously united – seven against the rest of the

world. How we loved; how we hated; how we fought, divided, and were reconciled again! How we trained, and educated ourselves; and developed a taste in literature and in the writing of it, in which, until years later, our elders had no part, and with which school hours had little to do.²

Alfred was sent away to spend his twelfth birthday with old family friends, the Wises of Woodchester where, on that birthday, he received a letter from his father telling him of his mother's death. The event had a profound effect on Housman. He later said that he became a deist at twelve and an atheist at twenty-one. The Wises of Woodchester had a German Governess, Sophie Becker, who became a very close friend of Alfred, and she is one of two or three close emotional attachments which Alfred made in his whole life. Laurence wrote in 1950:

I think the woman he loved most in the world was his mother...after that probably came Sophie Becker, who 'mothered' him in his great loss; I think his *mother-love* was very passionate...³

Housman entered Bromsgrove School with a Foundation Scholarship on 12th September 1870. The replacement of the Headmaster, Dr Blore gave Alfred his first real mentor, Herbert

Millington, the man who had the greatest influence on Housman's early classical training, and who remained a lifelong friend.

His two school-prize winning poems, *The Death of Socrates* and *Paul on Mars Hill* are long narrative poems. *The Death of Socrates* was his first published poem, which appeared in the school magazine and the local paper. There has been a difference of opinion over his poem *Sir Walter Raleigh*. One of the prizes he won at school was *Sabrinae Corolla*, a book of translations of English poetry into Latin and Greek. This book, Housman said, "implanted in me a genuine liking for Greek and Latin"⁴

Housman was awarded a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford, in 1877. His earliest Oxford friend was his fellow classics scholar Arthur Pollard. He later became acquainted with Moses Jackson who, he told Laurence years afterwards, "had more influence on my life than anyone else".⁵ "These three friends shared digs together in their more senior Oxford years, and at sometime during this period A.E.H. began to understand that he had fallen in love with Moses Jackson."⁶

Housman's favourite poet was Matthew Arnold and he recommended *Empedocles on Etna* as containing "all the law and all the prophets."⁷ Hardy's pessimistic view of life was probably

the cause of Housman's admiration for him. He also read and enjoyed W.H. Mallock's "Is Life Worth Living?" (1879), "the title of which may be said crudely to summarize his later poetry."⁸ He made a number of contributions of humorous prose and verse to an undergraduate periodical *Ye Rounde Table*, under the pen-name of "Tristram" He published two poems — 'Parta Quies' and 'New Year's Eve' in another Oxford magazine, *Waifs and Strays*. The former is one of the best poems he ever wrote.

During their fourth year Pollard, Jackson and Housman took a set of rooms in St. Giles, opposite St. John's College. "But Arthur Pollard, who knew better than anyone else what was going on, put it down to lack of work on the syllabus and over confidence. For night after night, while Arthur was busy revising, Alfred and Moses were chatting. Moses had already completed his three-year course in Physics, with First Class Honours, and had nothing to lose. Only Alfred was building up trouble. Captivated by the charm of Moses he was wasting his time."⁹

There are other factors to do with Housman's course of work at Oxford. He made a close study of the manuscripts of the Roman poet Propertius. It took a lot of time and certainly an original work, but entirely outside the syllabus. Subjects which were relevant, like the ancient history and philosophy part of the

Greats syllabus, were of no interest to him. There have been instances of able students at Oxford who became diverted on to researches more to their own liking than the set works. When the final exams came, he was completely unprepared and failed. It was the second great disaster of his life. Years later he himself wrote, "They (the examiners) had no option but to plough me."¹⁰

He returned to Bromsgrove in disgrace, without a degree and no visible source of income. Laurence writes, "if sympathy was what he feared to receive on his return from Oxford, he took the best means to deprive himself of it."¹¹ However, during this period he worked hard and took the Oxford pass degree in a year, and then took the Civil Service Examination and was offered an appointment as a Higher Division Clerk, first in Dublin, which he refused, and then in the Patent Office in London. Moses Jackson was in the same office, working as Examiner of Electrical Specifications. Jackson and his younger brother Adalbert invited Housman to share their rooms in Bayswater. At this time he kept away from his family, feeling their disappointment, for their hopes had centered on him, and his academic failure came at a time when his father's ill-health caused him to leave his practice.

In 1892 Housman was appointed as a Professor of Latin at University College, London. Housman delivered the traditional Introductory Lecture. He gave it the title, "Reasons for Acquiring Knowledge." A part of the lecture has been quoted in chapter 2. Its theme is the defence of learning for its own sake.

Now Housman had achieved what he truly wanted— the life of a senior university academic. He was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Law from 1895–6 to 1896–7, and from 1899 he was a member of the College Council. He read papers on Matthew Arnold, the Spasmodic School, Erasmus, Darwin, Robert Burns, Tennyson and Swinburne; all rather surprising since he regarded himself as a textual not a literary critic.

For Housman, research and publication were more important than teaching. The first volume of his edition of the *Astronomica of Manilius* appeared in 1903, and an edition of Juvenal in 1905. Housman became interested at an early age in astronomy, and once placed members of his family on the lawn to represent the motions of the planets— the sun, the earth and the moon.

J.E.B. Myor, the Professor of Latin at Cambridge University died in 1910. Housman was nominated for his Chair and to a Fellowship at Trinity College. Within a few months of his election, the Chair of Latin was renamed the Kennedy Professorship, in honour of Benjamin Kennedy whose *Sabrinæ*

Corollae had greatly influenced Housman in his schooldays. The Cambridge Inaugural Lecture which he delivered in May 1911 was suppressed because he could not verify a statement it contained about the text of Shelley's *Lament* of 1821. It was first published in 1969 under the title, "The confines of Criticism". In this he delineates the limits of textual criticism as a science, not a branch of literature. It is not an exact science either, since its results, unlike true scientific data, cannot be experimentally proved.

Housman's personal life while he was at the college remains rather shadowy. Nobody seems to have got really close to him, certainly among the academic staff and students. His teaching at University College seems to have been more than adequate, but he was not an inspiring tutor. His former students picture him as a reticent and fairly dry character, somewhat aloof, setting his students high standards. There are stories of him sending female students away in tears. He was also prone to forgetting his students' names. Platt and W.P.Ker, the Scotts English Professor, were his main friends among the academic staff. One of his farewell comments before the College, at the Professors' Dining Club, was on a bibulous theme:

Cambridge has seen many strange sights. It has seen Wordsworth drunk; it has seen Porson sober. Now I am a

greater scholar than Wordsworth, and a greater poet than Porson, so I fall betwixt and between.¹²

In 1933, he was persuaded against his better judgement to accept an invitation to deliver the Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge. He told Percy Withers that while writing the lecture "his days had been unabated torment. He had awakened every morning to the dread of a task to which he could bring no heart, and a struggle that had never given him a moment's satisfaction, or could so give".¹³ Housman called his lecture *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. He stated that poetry was not the thing said, but a way of saying it. Poetry was not the same as verse, and simile and metaphor were inessential to it. As to the creation of a poem, he said that this was "in its first stage...less an active than a passive and involuntary process...". "It had the effect of a counter-blast to the new generation of Cambridge literary critics, represented by I.A.Richards and F.R.Leavis, even though it never mentioned them, nor even alluded to their existence"¹⁴ The story goes that afterwards, as everybody filed out of the hall, Richards was heard to mutter, "This has set us back ten years."¹⁵

During the last three years of his life he continued to work, despite increasing ill-health. "It is likely that Housman, if he had been so inclined, would have received honorary doctorates at

half a dozen leading universities, would have been appointed to the Order of Merit, could have been knighted and might even have become Poet Laureate. But he was not so inclined. He steadfastly refused every offer of high academic honour.”¹⁶ Several letters of this time give a precise insight into Housman’s religious stand. To Maurice Pollet in 1933 he wrote:

I was brought up in the Church of England and in the high Church party, which is much the best religion I have ever come across. But Lempriere’s Classical Dictionary, which fell into my hands when I was eight, attached my affections to paganism. I became a deist at thirteen and an atheist at twenty-one.¹⁷

He explained his attitude to life to Houston Martin in 1936:

In philosophy I am a Cyrenaic or egoistic hedonist, and regard the pleasures of the moment as the only possible motive of action. As for pessimism, I think it almost as silly, though not as wicked, as optimism. George Eliot said she was a meliorist: I am a pejorist, and also yours sincerely,

A.E.Housman¹⁸

April 24 saw his last lecture and his last meeting of the Family dining club, although he was too ill to eat. Next day he

went back to the Evelyn Nursing Home where on 30 April 1936 he died. At his funeral in Trinity College Chapel, his own hymn, "For My Funeral" (MP 47) was sung. It suggests a divine presence to those who want to find it there, but a mere return of dust to dust, to those who look for no other point in life.

A.E. Housman's ashes lie beneath a stone tablet under the north wall of Ludlow Church, the same Ludlow Tower of his poems. A larger stone, set in the wall, quotes some of his own lines:

Good-night; ensured release,
Imperishable peace,
Have these for yours.

They come from "Parta Quies" (MP XLVIII).

Poetical Works:

Two collections of Housman's verse were published in his lifetime: *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) and *Last Poems* (1922). His popularity as a poet undoubtedly rests on *A Shropshire Lad*. His original plan was to link the poems by suggesting an imaginary narrator, who was to be called Terence Hearsay. Only two of the poems mention Terence as a speaker. It was Arthur Pollard—loyal and wise friend from Oxford days—who told him that the proposed title, "Poems of Terence Hearsay", was a bad idea. He rather suggested "*A Shropshire Lad*", a suggestion that might have contributed to the book's success. Arthur also advised Housman to try his own publisher, Kegan Paul; since his first approach to Macmillan had proved fruitless.

A year later, in March 1896, Housman published *A Shropshire Lad*, at his own expense, but under Kegan Paul's imprint. Within two years it was sold out, and for the second edition Housman was approached by a young publisher called Grant Richards, who was trying to make a name for himself by taking up the latest poets— including Thomas Hardy. Richards remained Housman's publisher, in one way or another, via bankruptcy, for the rest of his life. He scolded him often for his

mistakes in printing, for his inconsistencies over copyright, and for his attempts to introduce editions that would be greater moneyspinners. For Housman was resolute in insisting that he did not want to make money out of his poems, and that he only wanted them to be available in cheap editions for young people.

His popularity has gradually increased since his death in 1936 if we apply the yardstick of the number of his poems which have been published in various anthologies. By 1918 an academic survey of contemporary literature declared, "the genius of Mr. A.E. Housman places him with the first of living English poets [that is, Hardy]".¹⁹ Norman Page points out, only five of his poems were included in Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, and soon afterwards (1939) the new edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* only three. The number increased to seventeen in the 1973 edition of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*.²⁰ This serves as an evidence of the growing appreciation of Housman's poetry, especially in the United States where the last of the above-mentioned anthologies is read by a large number of young students of poetry.

After the publication of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which coincided with that of Housman's *Last Poems* in 1922, the

popularity of Housman's verse suffered a diminution. This is in no real sense a postwar collection and was regarded as belonging to a vanished age. Still, for the generation of second and third decades of twentieth century Housman exercised a unique influence. George Orwell attests the fact:

At the beginning of the period I am speaking of, the years during and immediately after the war, the writer who had the deepest hold upon the thinking young was almost certainly Housman. Among people who were adolescent in the years 1910–25, Housman had an influence which was enormous and is now not at all easy to understand. In 1920, when I was about seventeen, I probably knew the whole of the *Shropshire Lad* by heart. I wonder how much impression the *Shropshire Lad* makes at this moment [1940] on a boy of the same age and more or less the same cast of mind?²¹

Last Poems appeared on October 19, 1922 in an edition of four thousand—a number decided by Grant Richards after discouraging noises from booksellers. However, it was such an instant success that by the end of the year a total of twenty-one thousand had been printed. Despite this instant popularity, it was generally recognized that this was more of the same stuff as

his first volume, despite the quarter of a century that has passed. In fact, some of the poems had been written, or at least started, before 1896, and a few had originally been intended for the earlier book, including *LP* III, "Her strong enchantments failing," and *LP* XI, "Yonder see the morning blink." The opening poem of *Last Poems* was entitled "The West", and took up the theme of the tender but painful world towards the setting sun, at the point where *A Shropshire Lad* had left it. Housman took every care over the arrangement of its contents, still we cannot call it a tightly ordered sequence. "The themes of *A Shropshire Lad* recur, and the world of redcoats, beer, the hangman's noose, woman's fickleness, is evoked, or recalled, in the first few pages."²² The title of the volume indicates that Housman intended to publish no more poems during his lifetime. He had finally answered the years of pestering from people like Grant Richards, eager for a follow-up to *A Shropshire Lad*. Lyrics V–VI, according to Housman, were written at the time of Boar War. XVII ('Astronomy'), also written at the beginning of the century, was prompted by the same war and recalls the opening poem of the earlier collection. XIII ('The Deserter') was, again according to Housman, begun in 1905 and finished in that same productive month of April 1922.

But *Last Poems* also contains one of the finest of all Housman's longer poems. This poem, XL ('Tell me not here, it needs not saying'), has its roots that lie deep in Housman's heart.

More Poems, adds a further forty-eight poems to the list of Housman's collected poems. "The systematic fictionalizing process that we have seen at work in *A Shropshire Lad* – the creation of a dramatic world as a device for truth-telling not otherwise to be contemplated – has no counterpart, or at best a counterpart only vestigial."²³ Many of the poems express a mood of despair in excess of any revealed cause. And yet there are poems in this volume as close to Housman's emotional life as anything he ever wrote. (XXXIV is a possible comment on the events of May 1881).

Moses Jackson's presence is often a potent one: among other examples, XXIII, XXX, and XXXI are fragments from an autobiographical account of Housman's feelings towards him. The attitude expressed in the last line of XXX is echoed in Housman's final letter to Moses. Although they are of considerable biographical interest, it needs to be remembered that these are poems and not letters or diary entries.

Actually *More Poems* and *Additional Poems*, salvaged from the notebooks and published after his death by his brother

Laurence, represent verse Housman elected not to publish himself.

Literary Influences:

One of the loveliest poems in *A Shropshire Lad* indicates influence of Stevenson. Following is the opening stanza of poem No. IV in *Underwoods* :

It is the season now to go
About the country high and low,
Among the lilacs hand in hand,
And two by two in fairyland.

And in its third verse we find the phrase 'A year ago at Eastertide'. Again the urgency is to be up and doing, to see the lovely lands on earth. Housman must have remembered Stevenson when he wrote:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

And again when he wrote in the last verse:

About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

Again the phrase from *In the States* which describes his feeling on leaving Britain:

With half a heart I wander here,
As from an age gone by....
Underwoods XXIX,1-2

which reminds us of Housman's parting from Moses Jackson:

I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder
And went with half my life about my ways.

No.XXXV of *Last Poems* is modelled on an anonymous Greek epigram of which an English version appears in *Sabrinae Corollae*. The original, No. IX 138 in the Palatine Anthology runs as follows:

“I was young and poor, but now in old age I am rich – alas! alone of all men wretched in both, who could have enjoyed when I had not the means, and now have the means when I cannot enjoy.”

The version in *Sabrinae Corollae* goes like this:

I was poor, but I was twenty,
Now at three score I have plenty;
What a miserable lot !

Now that I have hoarded treasure,
I can no more taste of pleasure:
When I could, I had it not.

Sabrinae Corollae, p.148.

Housman wrote his poem on the same theme:

When first my way to fair I took
Few pence in purse had I,
And long I used to stand and look
At things I could not buy.

Now times are altered: if I care
To buy a thing, I can;
The pence are here, and here's the fair,
But where is the lost young man?

One of the strongest literary influences on Housman seems to have been that of Matthew Arnold. Arnold's Empedocles reflects about the feelings and emotions that possess the human heart:

Born into life—'tis we,
And not the world, are new.

Our cry for this, our plea,
Others have urged it too;
Our wants have all been felt, our errors made
before.

Housman's Shropshire lad has similar reflections:

Aye, yonder lads are yet
The fools that we were then;
For oh, the sons we get
Are still the sons of men.
The sumless tale of sorrow
Is all unrolled in vain:
May comes tomorrow
And Ludlow fair again.
(LP XXXIV)

"Arnold's influence on Housman probably extends to the careful and exact descriptions of flowers, trees and landscape in which both poets excel."²⁴ A line from *Sohrab and Rustum*, for example,

Marshall'd battalions bright in burnish'd steel.
(*S and R.*, l.139)

has probably given two words to a description in one of the finest of *Last Poems*:

On acres of the seeded grasses
The changing burnish heaves:
Or marshaled under moons of harvest
Stand still at night the sheaves;
(LP XL)

Both poets use 'flute' as a transitive verb. In LP XLI Housman writes:

And flute the sun to sleep

This is like *Thyrsis*, 90:

And flute his friend, like Orpheus, from the dead.

Three of Arnold's *Lines Written by a Death-bed*:

Because on its hot brow there blows
A wind of promise and repose
From the far grave, to which it goes.

reminds us of the 'far grave' of the lover in *A Shropshire Lad*:

In the land to which I travel,
The far dwelling, let me say—
Once, if here the couch is gravel,
In a kinder bed I lay

(*ASL XI*)

Housman's outlook on life was influenced by his early reading in Herodotus. His agnostic contemporaries like Morley and Spencer also play a very important role in shaping his philosophy of life. "Homer's feelings about life and death have earned for Housman the name of pessimist." and "Homer view of life is profoundly sad. He believes in no future happiness to redress any injustice in this world,"²⁵ He makes Zeus say

'There is none more wretched than man of all creatures which
breathe and crawl on the earth.'

(*Il. XVII*, 446-7)

Housman exhorts himself:

What evil luck soever
For me remains in store,
'Tis sure much finer fellows
Have feared much before.

(*LP II*)

Another Greek poet, Asclepiades, comes nearest to the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* which speak of unrequited love. A lover of one-and-twenty in Asclepiades's poetry laments:

'I am not yet two and twenty, and I am weary of life. Oh loves,
why this suffering? Why consume me?'

(*Anthologia Palatina*..XII, 46)

Here is Housman's:

The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue.'
And I am two and twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.
(ASL XIII.)

"Its chief sources of which I am conscious", wrote Housman to Maurice Pollet, "are Shakespeare's songs, the Scottish border ballads, and Heine."²⁶ Percy Withers tells us that Housman "had carefully—I inferred from his statement, almost meticulously— investigated all three sources, though equally he had been careful to avoid imitation: they had been no more, he believed, than fortunate influences."²⁷

It becomes clear that Housman was not in fact careful to avoid imitation, and in many cases the imitation is so direct that he seems to be making explicit allusion to the earlier passage. One of the finest songs, *Fear no more the heat o' the sun* is repeatedly echoed by Housman. The opening lines:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
(*Cymbeline* IV,II, 258–9)

are deliberately alluded to in *The Immortal Part*:

'Rest you so from trouble sore,
Fear the heat o' the son no more,
Nor the snowing winter wild,
Now you labour not with child.'
(ASL XLIII)

and in the very next poem we find a reminiscence of the ending of the first verse of the song:

Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.
(*Cymbeline*, IV, II, 261–63)

Housman compresses the first two lines and adds a dark thought:

Dust's your wages, son of sorrow,
But men may come to worse than dust.
(*ASL XLIV*)

The phrase 'golden lads' attracted him and he used it twice: first in the lament for lost friends in *A Shropshire Lad*:

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
(*ASL LIV.*)

and again in *Last Poems*:

Think , I the round world over,
What golden lads are low
With hurts not mine to mourn for
And shames I shall not know.
(*LP II*)

A phrase from Balthazar's song in *Much Ado About Nothing*, II, ii, 64:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.

The phrase is recalled by Housman:

Lads that waste the light in sighing
In the dark should sigh no more;
(*ASL XI*)

Sometimes Housman's poem echoes an arresting phrase from Shakespeare. For example, the line:

Dear to friends and food for powder,
(ASL XXXV)
is a reminiscence of Falstaff's:

Food for powder, food for powder.
(*King Henry IV*, Part I, IV, ii, 72)

It has been pointed out by Tom Burns Haber in an article on the influence of ballads in Housman's poetry ²⁸ that out of his 178 published poems all but 47 are in the quatrain pattern common to ballad poetry.

ASL LIII, The True Lover, tells a story in the ballad manner. It opens with a lover coming to the door at night:

Light was the air beneath the sky
But dark under the shade.

In *Clerk Saunders* the lovers are lying together:

It was about the midnight hour,
When they asleep were laid,
(*The Oxford Book of Ballads*, 27, V)

In *Willy's Lady* the jealous mother threatens her son with the death of his wife and with his own faithlessness:

'But she shall die and turn to clay,
And ye shall wed another may.
(*O.B.B.* 6, XVII)

So Housman's Terence hears the aspen and its message:

Two lovers looking to be wed;
And time shall put them both to bed,
But she shall lie with earth above,
And he beside another love.'
(*ASL* XXVI)

Bredon Hill opens with two lovers on Bredon Hill:

In summertime on Bredon

The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.

Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,

A hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.

(ASL XXI)

In the opening lines of the first and second verses he has adopted lines from the third stanza of *A Love Sonnet* by George Wither:

In summertime to Medley
My love and I would go.

The tragedy of unrequited love haunts Housman, and in several of his poems he treats the theme of a heartless mistress who relents too late. Here we have a lover who is dying of his love:

When the lad for longing sighs,
Mute and dull of cheer and pale,
If at death's own door he lies,
Maiden, you can heal his ail.
(ASL VI)

This is what happens to the lover in *Barbara Allen*:

All in the merry month of May,
When green buds they were swellin',
Young Jemmy Grove on his death-bed lay,
For love of Barbara Allen.
(O.B.B.158)

The cadence of the words 'return again' of which Housman is very fond of at the end of a verse:

Lovely lads and dead and rotten;
None that go return again.

(ASL XXXV)

is also beloved of ballad writers, as for example in *Broomfield Hill*:

‘That a maid shanna gae to the bonny broom
And a maiden return again.

(O.B.B. 24, II)

and in *Young Waters*:

‘But I neir rade thro’ Stirling town
Neir to return again.

(O.B.B. 82, XII)

Many poems of *A Shropshire Lad* seem to show the influence of Kipling’s *Barrack-Room Ballads*, particularly *The New Mistress*. The reference to death as ‘bitter beer’ in *Danny Deeveer*:

‘E’s drinkin’ bitter beer alone,’ the Colour-Sergeant
said.

is like the line in *LP XXV*, which is in the same colloquial vein:

‘Tis true there’s better boose than brine, but he that drowns
must drink it;

Housman in those poems “which cry out against the ‘iniquity on high’ and inveigh bitterly against the destiny of man to ask and without an answer till his mouth is filled with earth”²⁹ is closest to Heine. Like him Heine has been charged with self-pity and adolescence. The themes of death and unrequited love are common to both. They use a simple, almost plain syntax and vocabulary. When he wrote first two stanzas of ‘Sinner’s Rue’ (*LP*

XXX) Housman was probably producing a version of Heine's 'Am Kreuzweg wird begraben':

He's buried at the crossroad,
He who his own hand slew;
A blue flower springs from earth there,
The flower of sinner's rue.

I stand at the crossroads sighing;
The still night chills me through.
In the moonlight gently trembles
The flower of sinner's rue.

(trans. Hal Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, OUP, 1982, p.73)

And here is Housman's version:

I walked alone and thinking,
And faint the nightwind blew
And stirred on mounds at crossways
The flower of sinner's rue.

Where the roads part they bury
Him that his own hand slays,
And so the weed of sorrow
Spring at the four cross ways.

There are many other echoes of lines and passages from Heine in Housman's poetry.

Housman was greatly influenced by the Authorized Version and of Coverdale's translation of the Psalms. He remembered Coverdale from childhood and the cadences of the Prayer-Book version of the Psalms touched his heart deeply, as he shows in *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. Sometimes he reproduces whole lines. As in:

When I shall lie below them,

A dead man out of mind.

(ASL LXIII.)

Which recall Psalm XXXI, 14: 'I am clean forgotten, as a dead man out of mind.' More often it is a phrase or part of a line.

ASL LXII:

And while the sun and moon endure
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure.

Ps. LXXII, 5, Cov.:

...As long as the sun and moon endureth.

The view of Ecclesiastes on life and death find an echo in Housman's heart. Several passages in Housman show a close parallel to the wisdom of the Son of Sirach .We can compare, for example, ASL XXIV:

Say, lad, have you things to do?
Quick then, while your day's at prime.
Quick, and if 'tis work for two,
Here am I, man: now's your time.

with Ecclus. XIV, 13:

Do good unto thy friend before thou die, and according to thy ability stretch out thy hand and give to him.

There are many verbal similarities of Job in Housman:

ASL XXXII:

Job XIII, 22: Speak now, and I will answer:

ASL LIII: Then call thou, and I will answer.

He hears: no more remembered
In fields where I was known.

Job XXIV, 20:

He shall be no more remembered;

Housman was a strong admirer of Milton. In *Sabrinae Corollae* we find extracts from *Paradise Lost* which are echoed in his poetry. The reference to the sun as the 'eye of day' is favourite with Milton. Housman would have seen the following examples in *Sabrinae Corollae*:

The liquid notes that close the eye of day,

(*Sonnet To The Nightingale*, 5)

Where day never shuts his eye,
Up in the broad fields of the sky.

(*Comus*, 978-9)

The phrase, or the echoes of it appears in Housman:

The year draws in the day
And soon will evening shut:

(Introductory poem to *LP*)

When the eye of day is shut,
And the stars deny their beams.

(*LP XXXIII*)

The cadence of *Paradise Lost* VIII, 239:

But us he sends upon high behests.

is echoed in *LP IX*:

To-morrow it will hie on far behests.

This description in *L'Allegro* has probably given Housman a picture of country life in the lines:

And the milkmaid singeth blithe,

And the mower whets his sithe.

(*L'Allegro*, 65-6)

Which reappears in *God's Acre*, No. XI of *Additional Poems*:

Blithe the maids go milking, blithe
Men in hayfields stone the scythe;

No Victorian can escape the influence of Tennyson, and Housman is no exception who, copies extracts from *In Memoriam*, *The Passing of Arthur*, *The Princess*, *A Dirge* and various other shorter poems. The influence of *A Dirge* was probably upon him when he wrote *Alta Quies*, and its contrast between the fever of life and the stillness of death is a common theme throughout Housman's poetry.

Now is done thy long day's work;
Fold thy palms across thy breast,
Fold thine arms, turn to thy rest.
Let them rave.
Shadows of the silver birk
Sweep the green that folds thy grave.
Let them rave.

This is echoed in:

When earth's foundation flee'
Nor sky nor land nor sea
At all is found.
Content you; let them burn,
It is not your concern:
Sleep on, sleep sound.

(*MP XLVIII*)

One of the characteristics which Tennyson shares with Housman is a scientific precision of vocabulary; Tennyson's interest in science and Housman's in astronomy lead them both to write of

men and events against a cosmic background and to employ the movements of the earth and the planets to convey emotion at man's dauntless and hapless courage.³⁰

Move eastward, happy earth, and leave
Yon orange sunset waning slow;
From fringes of the faded eve,
O, happy planet, eastward go.

(*Move Eastward*, 1859)

Housman also makes us feel the motions of the earth and planets in this way. The following passage comes very near even to the language of these four lines:

Too fast to yonder strand forlorn
We journey, to the sunken bourn,
To flush the fading tinges eyed
By other lads at eventide.

(*LP I*)

Other Victorians also influenced Housman. About Christina Rossetti he "thought highly and said that posterity would probably place her above Swinburne".³¹ She writes in "Shall I forget?"

Shall I forget on this side of the grave?
I promise nothing: you must wait and see,
Patient and brave.

And in *MP XII* Housman writes:

I promise nothing: friends will part;
All things may end, for all began.

There is one unmistakable echo of Andrew Lang in Housman's poetry. In Valentine *In Form of Ballads*, he writes:

Where sands of Egypt, swart and red,
'Neath suns Egyptian glow,
In places of the princely dead,
By the Nile's overflow.

Probably Housman had these lines in his mind when he wrote:

And the Nile spills his overflow
Beside the Severn's dead.

Housman draws quite freely and impartially upon all periods of English poetry. Here, for example, a line in the *Knight's Tale* of Chaucer:

The slayer of himself yet saw I there.

has given a phrase to the poem *Hughley Steeple*:

And steeple-shadowed slumber
The slayers of themselves.

The mannerism in the lines in Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*:

The grave's a fine and private,
But none, I think, do there embrace,

is dropped and the negative used characteristically at the end of a poem:

Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside,
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.
(ASL XII)

Housman probably read and liked Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*. He says:

I still had hopes, my long vexations pass'd,
Here to return—and die at home at last.
(*The Deserted Village*, 95-6)

We find its echo in *MP III*:

They cease from long vexation.

These reminiscences indicate the wide range of Housman's reading and show him to be steeped in the poetry of his contemporaries besides the Greek and Latin poetry. After studying the biographical and literary background of A.E.Housman in the foregoing pages I now proceed to take up the major themes of his poetry in the next chapters.

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Chapter- 2

Theme of Death

The death of Housman's mother on his twelfth birthday, his sister Katherine Symons reports, had such a lasting effect on him that death became an obsession.¹ Kate also recalled that he was "subject to gloom that spread in spite of his attempts to subdue it."² When setting subjects for poems by children of his family more than a year after his mother died, he began with 'Death', and the two pictures with which he decorated his rooms at Oxford were Durer's *Melancholia* and *The Knight, Death and the Devil*. The sense of loss, of betrayal, of confusion for the child of twelve can only have been agonizing. There is nothing whatever about it in his writings. But it certainly shaped his philosophy of life.

The concern with human transience is one of the most prominent themes of English poetry, and in many respects Housman's treatment of this theme is quite conventional. Exile, love, soldiering and nature are also among his themes. These themes are interconnected and that is why any of these can be associated with the theme of death. Like Shakespeare, he laments

that "Golden lads and girls all must/As chimney-sweepers, come to dust." He discovers, like Keats, death in the midst of beauty. Like Marvell and his contemporaries, he concludes in poems such as "Loveliest of Trees" that an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to experience it more intensely. Even in the London Introductory Lecture there is the same insistence on living now rather than tomorrow. Housman is strongly against those who spend their lives in amassing worldly goods or on putting something aside for a rainy day:

Existence is not in itself a good thing, that we should spend a lifetime in securing the necessities: a life spent, however victoriously, in securing the necessities of life is no more than an elaborate furnishing and decoration of apartments for the reception of a guest who is never to come.... our true occupation is to manufacture from the raw material of life the fabric of happiness; and if we are ever to set about our work we must make up our minds to risk something. Absolute security for existence is unattainable, and no wise man will pursue it; for if we must go to these lengths in the attempt at self-preservation we shall die before ever we have begun to live.³

Many of Housman's poems like "Loveliest of Trees" are reminiscent of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Khayyam laments the brevity of human life in many of his *Rubaiyat* and insists on the utmost enjoyment of each moment of our temporal existence in an Epicurean manner. Housman's attitude to human life is Cyrenaic rather than Epicurean.

However, in many of the poems, the persona recognizes the transience and decay and this recognition leads to the acceptance of death rather than a more meaningful participation in the activities of life. *ASL VII*, for example, characterizes life as a cyclical process of change ending only in death. The speaker in the poem asks: "What use to rise and rise? / Rise man a thousand mornings / Yet down at last he lies....' " (ll. 12-14). And lines from the last stanza strengthen the absoluteness of the process with this analogy: "The sun moves always west; / The road one treads to labour / Will lead one home to rest..." (ll. 27-29). Ultimately the persona adds in an acceptance of death as the end of the cycle: " 'And that will be the best.' "

ASL II, "Loveliest of Trees", appears to be the most simple of poetic utterances. It opens with an image from nature which seems to suggest the beauty of life at its prime:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

(ll. 1-4)

But the image has an ironic effect on the observer; it reminds him
of his own mortality:

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score
It only leaves me fifty more.

(ll. 5-8)

His reaction is further complicated by the last stanza, for
instead of becoming pessimistic in the face of approaching death,
the speaker determines to involve himself in the beauty of the world
even though it will be “hung with snow,” coloured by the knowledge
of death:

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow

(ll. 9-12)

The surface statement of the poem is simple: life is beautiful
but it is short; and since it is short, one must enjoy it now. But
Housman’s treatment of the theme is not as simple as it appears.
The poem looks simple because of its pastoral mode. The situation
is perceived through the eyes of the Shropshire lad himself, a
modern pastoral figure. The cherry, “loveliest of trees,” is, in a real

sense, the tree of knowledge in the poem, and the changes in the images associated with it suggest a transition from innocence to knowledge. After its introduction in lines 1 and 2, the cherry tree is mentioned three times. In line 4 it is spoken of as “wearing white for Eastertide,” in line 9 it is referred to as a thing “in bloom,” and in the last line of the poem it is said to be “hung with snow.”

What these three images suggest has been a point of debate for critics. Winifred Lynskey has said that the snow image carries with it the suggestion of winter and death, merely continuing the association with death that the “Eastertide” had introduced in the first stanza;⁴ W.L.Werner has argued that the *snow* is, in a poetic sense, no more than “a mass of white petals,” and the association of Easter with death is “sheer perversion, for if Easter has any meaning, it is resurrection and immortal life.”⁵ It is true that Easter, as a poetic symbol, has been traditionally associated with springtime and rebirth, not winter and death. It is also true that a phrase such as “hung with snow,” cannot be separated from the meanings which cling to it through traditional associations. The phrases “wearing white for Eastertide,” and “hung with snow,” are both clearly descriptive of the whiteness of the cherry blossom. But the images cannot be limited to colour

associations, and snow carries with it winter and death as surely as Easter carries with it the idea of spring and rebirth.

What has been ignored is that the “snow” of the last line derives its full symbolic meaning from the structure of the poem. The image pattern progresses from spring (“wearing white for Eastertide”) to summer (“things in bloom”) to winter (“hung with snow”); or if one prefers, from rebirth, to growth, to death.⁶ This is a clear improvement in the knowledge of the young man who observes that the “loveliest” aspects of nature are the most melancholy, for they reveal a world in decay and death.

ASL IV (“Reveille”), continues the theme established in “Loveliest of Trees”. Title of the poem indicates both its subject and its central metaphor. It is a call for action in the face of approaching death. The poem develops its theme through the metaphor of the sun’s passage from dawn to dusk. The poem, as Keith Jebb states, “catches the note of temptation, the desire for wider horizons.”⁷ The repetition of the phrases like “up lad” and “wake” indicate a note of urgency for the young men fast asleep in the dawn:

Wake the silver dusk returning
Up the beach of darkness brims,
And the ship of sunrise burning
Strands upon the eastern rims.
(ll. 1-4)

Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
Hear the drums of morning play:
Hark, the empty highways crying
"Who'll beyond the hills away?"
(ll. 9-12)

Housman uses traditional symbolic association of light with life and darkness with death. The poem is based on the analogy of the journey of life and the journey of the sun from dawn to dusk. However, Housman saves the poem from becoming commonplace by leaving the comparison unstated. These metaphors seem designed as if to appeal to the young persons to get up and grab what they can of life's good things before death closes the opportunity for action.

Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber
Sunlit pallets never thrive;
Morns abed and daylight slumber
Were not meant for man alive.

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
Breath's a ware that will not keep.
Up, lad: when the journey's over
There'll be time enough to sleep.

(ll. 17-24)

In *A Shropshire Lad* we come across two apparently conflicting views regarding the relative values of life and death — on the one hand, an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to

experience it more intensely; on the other, a desire for the release of death. It is the second element of the theme that has led many critics to dismiss Houseman as a bitter pessimist who exposes the dark side and gloomy passions of an existence that is not worth maintaining. However, a careful analysis of the poems in which these two aspects of the theme appear casts some doubt on this conclusion. It becomes clear, after examining the view of life represented by "Loveliest of Trees", that to regard Housman merely as a pessimist is to oversimplify a more complex attitude. "Reveille" opens with dawn and closes with the suggestion of approaching night. In the same way, "Loveliest of Trees" with its progression from springtime to winter; but in neither of these poems does the knowledge of the brevity of life lead to a rejection of it, rather they emphasize the value of life and the necessity of an intense and vital existence.

Some critics of Housman have misinterpreted the view of life contained in *A Shropshire Lad* because they ignore this line of development. Hugh Molson, for example, states that Housman regarded human life "as an unmerited ordeal which serves no useful purpose but from which man obtains his final release after death."⁸ Stephen Spender finds that "the hanging, suicides,

shooting, war, hemlock” of Housman’s poems express his feelings about “the wretchedness of life...”⁹ Edmund Wilson writes that in Housman’s poetry “we find only the realization of man’s smallness ...of his own basic wrongness to himself, his own inescapable anguish.”¹⁰ Yet we have clearly seen that “Reveille” and “Loveliest of Trees” encourages us for a meaningful existence even though they make us equally conscious of approaching death.

This view is not limited to one or two poems. *ASL* XXIV, calls for the same kind of involvement, and for exactly the same reasons:

Say, lad, have you things to do?
Quick then, while your day’s at prime.
Quick, and if ’tis work for two,
Here am I, man: now’s your time.
(ll. 1-4)

Again the basis for action and involvement in youth “while your day’s at prime” is the consciousness that maturity implies decay and death:

Use me ere they lay me low
Where a man’s no use at all;

Ere the wholesome flesh decay,
And the willing nerve be numb,
And the lips lack breath to say,
“No, my lad, I cannot come.”
(ll. 7-12)

ASL LVII is yet another expression of the value of life, even in the face of eternal death:

But better late than never:
I shall have lived a little while
Before I die for ever.

(ll. 6-8)

These poems clearly dispel the doubt about the view that Housman considered life as an “unmerited ordeal” from which death releases man. This is a view which implies that death is superior to life. The tone of lyrics II, IV, XXIV, XXXII, and LVII (from *ASL*) is against such a view. We can give examples of many passages in *A Shropshire Lad* in which Housman states that life at its prime is far superior to death. In *ASL* XXV the speaker states: “A lad that lives and has his will /Is worth a dozen dead.” (ll. 11-12). *ASL* XXXIII introduces the idea of prolonging life through love:

If truth in heart that perish
Could move the powers on high,
I think the love I bear you
Should make you not to die.

(ll. 1-4)

A number of the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* thus emphasize a value to life because it is brief and impermanent. Yet this feature of his work is directly against the view that Housman voices “a philosophy compounded of pessimism and defeat.”¹¹ Actually, *A Shropshire Lad* is self-contradictory in its treatment of the relative values of life and death. A number of critics have pointed out this fact. For instance, Jacob Bronowski says:

Housman's poems reel from one standard to another. If one poem finds love worthy ... The poem over the page will find it pointless ... If one poem is glad that a young man has left life before honour, the next will say that silly lads always want to leave their life.¹²

Hugh Molson also finds that Housman answers the question of the value of life and death in contradictory ways:

The feeling that it is better to be alive than dead is vigorously expressed by a suitor who, rejected while his rival was alive, has survived him with satisfactory results... Exactly the opposite opinion is expressed in another poem.¹³

J.B. Priestley writes:

... his running grievance, on examination, can be resolved into two separate complaints that are not at all consistent; in the first, life is lovely enough, but all too short, and death is the enemy of happiness; in the second, existence itself is a misery only to be endured until the welcome arrival of death the deliverer. ¹⁴

Housman's obsession with death has been widely noted and condemned. R.P. Blackmur found that Housman wrote "almost

entirely of death.”¹⁵ Even after a cursory reading of the work we get the impression that death is somehow central to the theme and mood of *A Shropshire Lad*. According to Keith Jebb , “death is the prime mover in the world of Shropshire; beyond the retelling of myth, beyond the martial theme (which itself occupies only half a dozen poems in *A Shropshire Lad*), beyond the theme of young love, there is death, weaving in and out of all of them.”¹⁶ Housman’s treatment of death has been subjected to frequent oversimplification. Since life is all too short and death is the end of life, it would appear that the poet would be opposed to death as the agent which destroys life. However, this is not always the case, for Housman’s attitude to death in *A Shropshire Lad* is paradoxical. To be fully understood it must be seen in relation to the concern with permanence and change, innocence and experience, which lies at the heart of the work. *A Shropshire Lad* is also marked by a search for permanence in a world of change.

Housman’s own life was also marked by the same kind of quest for permanence mirrored in his poetry. On October 3, 1892, he delivered the traditional introductory lecture to open the academic year before the Faculties of Arts and Laws and Science in University College, London. He spoke of the value of learning and

knowledge, and one passage is particularly important because it indicates that his choice of a life of scholarship may have been related to the theme that characterizes his poetry. He stated:

The pleasures of the intellect are notoriously less vivid than either the pleasures of sense or the pleasures of the affections; and therefore, especially in the season of youth, the pursuit of knowledge is likely enough to be neglected and lightly esteemed in comparison with other pursuits offering much stronger immediate attractions. But the pleasure of learning and knowing, though not the keenest, is yet the least perishable of pleasures; the least subject to external things, and the play of chance, and the wear of time. And as a prudent man puts money by to serve as a provision for the material wants of his old age, so too he needs to lay up against the end of his days provision for the intellect. As the years go by, comparative values are found to alter: Time, says Sophocles, takes many things which once were pleasures and brings them nearer to pain. In the days when the strong men shall bow themselves, and the

desires shall fail, it will be a matter of yet more concern than now, whether one can say “my mind to me a kingdom is”; and whether the windows of the soul look out upon a broad and delightful landscape, or face nothing but a brick wall.¹⁷

Here we find a link between Housman’s scholarship and his poetry. Both represent a search for permanence in a mutable world. The unique quality of learning for Housman is that it is not subject to the “wear of time.” It becomes clear from the lecture that how strongly the process of change affected Housman’s thinking and writing. The lecture was delivered less than three years before the spring of 1895, when a large number of the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* were written. The quest for permanence, which is a part of the argument for the supremacy of the pleasures of the intellect over the pleasures of the senses in Housman’s scholarly activities, becomes a turning point in Housman’s poetry. It is in this context that his concern with death in *A Shropshire Lad* must be seen.

ASL XIX, “To an Athlete Dying Young” very clearly explains the complexity which characterizes Housman’s view of death. The athlete in the poem obviously symbolizes for the poet that period of

greatest value in life, for he has both youth and achievement. "The smart lad who slips betimes away is a moving image of all youthful endeavour."¹⁸ The poem is an example of the paradox which characterizes *A Shropshire Lad*. Death, the enemy of mankind, offers sometimes an occasion for joy.

Housman uses the images which are associated with the youth's achievement to describe his death. Stanzas 1 and 2 of the poem describe the two triumphant processions in which the athlete has taken part. In the first, he is carried triumphantly through the town on the shoulders of his friends after winning a race:

The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Men and boy stood cheering by,
And whom you we brought you shoulder high.

(ll. 1-4)

In stanza 2 the young athlete is brought home dead, but the parallels between this procession and the former triumph are carefully drawn:

To-day, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town.

(ll. 5-8)

The implication of this parallel is that death is also a victory. The youth is regarded as a "smart lad" not simply because he is dead

but because death has occurred at the prime of his life. He will not have to watch his records being broken by others, more youthful men after his physical strength has been withered by age:

Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut,
And silence sounds no worse than cheers
After earth has stopped the ears.....
(ll. 13-16)

Thus death in the poem becomes the agent by which the process of change is halted. There is a sharp contrast between mutability of the world of living and the new-found permanence of the youth in death. In stanza 3 the physical world is described as “fields where glory does not stay,” and the poet adds that “early though the laurel grows/It withers quicker than rose” (ll. 11-12). The laurel and the rose here apparently represent fame and beauty,¹⁹ both subject to decay in life but not, according to the conceit of the poem, in death. In the last stanza, the poet returns to the laurel and the rose in an indirect way, and he emphasizes the contrast between life and death:

And round the early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.
(ll. 25-28)

Here through the references to the “early laurelled head” and the garland “briefer than a girl’s” the poem suggests again the notions of fame and beauty, which were spoken of in stanza 3 as withering quickly in life. In death, however, the youth’s garland is “unwithered on its curls.” The poem thus emphasizes the contrast between two states, one marked by decay, the other by permanence.

Here we find a relation between Housman’s view of death and his concern with mutability. This relationship provides us with the obvious conclusion that ‘death’ in “To an Athlete Dying Young” is a part of a conceit which runs throughout the poem. It is the very nature of the conceit to bring together radically dissimilar ideas which are illogical to the common-sense world of fact. Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” for example, uses a conceit similar to Housman’s in conveying meaning which could be expressed effectively in no other way. The danger of abstracting Housman’s view of death and discussing it literally as a philosophical belief thus becomes immediately apparent. This danger is illustrated by a comparison of Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young” and Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”.

There are numerous parallels between the two poems. In both, life has been frozen at the moment of highest intensity. Keats's urn is a "still unravish'd bride," and Housman's athlete in death holds the "still-defended challenge-cup." There is a triumph over time in both poems. In Keats's poem the figures are frozen in action on an ancient urn, but because they can never consummate their actions, they are "for ever warm and still to be enjoyed/ For every panting, and for ever young." Keats also compares this state of permanence in art with that of life. He finds that the passions frozen on the urn are

All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead and a parching tongue.
(ll. 28-30)

Housman's athlete is frozen in death also. In fact, the description of the dead youth serves to fix him in an immobile position in space and time:

So set, before its echoes fade,
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
And hold to the low lintel up
The still-defended challenge-cup.
(ll. 21-24)

Elizabeth Nitchie while searching for the sources of this imagery, offers a further parallel with Keats's poem, although she does not herself imply that such a parallel exists. She points out that carvings of some Greek stelae represent the dead person standing

or sitting in a door way. Such pictures, she finds, obviate the necessity of the interpretations of the “low lintel” of line 23 as the edge of the grave or as the lid of the coffin, as other critics have suggested.²⁰ We do not know whether Housman had such carvings in mind, but it is true that his description of the youth in the final stanza is almost that of a statue, around which the dead gather (“And round that early-laurelled head/Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead”).

Both poems, then, are constructed around a poetic conceit which is meaningful only in the context of the poem. Housman uses certain metaphorical conception of death in the same way that Keats uses the conception of art — to halt the decay of time and preserve the moment of highest intensity. To separate either conception from the poem is to destroy it by ignoring its context, a principle very necessary to the integrity of the poem as a whole.

ASL XII illustrates a similar conception of death as a metaphorical agent for halting decay. Again, the poem compares the two states of being and non-being. Life is characterized as “the house of flash” where “the heats of hate and lust /....are strong.” Death is the “house of dust” where “revenges are forgot, / and the hater hates no more.” The time duration of the two states is also

different.. In life man will “lodge a little while,” but in the house of dust, his “sojourn shall be long.” The last stanza of the poem reminds us Keats’s ode because it depicts two lovers in death:

Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside,
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.
(ll. 13-16)

In death the lovers are forever bride and bridegroom. Their state can never be altered by time. It is thus regarded as superior to the “house of flesh,” characterized by “the heats of hate and lust.” Death has caught the lovers at the highest point of their love and halted the progress of time.

ASL XLIII, “The Immortal Part,” again highlights Housman’s quest for permanence. The narrator suggests that the only immortal part of the body is the bone, rather than the soul. In Housman’s poem it is the bones, “the immortal part,” that speak, demanding the death of the flesh:

“When shall this slough of sense be cast,
This dust of thoughts be laid at last’
The man of flesh and soul be slain
And the man of bone remain?”
(ll. 5-8)

The permanent man, the man of bone, is born only after the temporal man of flesh and mind has melted away. The bones will

endure long after the narrator's life has ceased. Immortality, the object of man's quest, is achieved, but it is a bitter victory:

"The immortal bones obey control
Of dying flesh and dying soul

" 'Tis long till eve and morn are gone:
Slow the endless night comes on,
And late to fullness grows the birth
That shall last as long as earth."
(ll. 15-20)

Before this fire of sense decay,
This smoke of thought blow clean away,
And leave with ancient night alone
(ll. 41-44)

As Cleanth Brooks notes, "The Immortal Part" offers a paradox because, "the immortal part of man is his skeleton— not the spirit, not the soul — but the most earthy, the most nearly mineral part of his body."²¹ The images used by the poet to describe life are temporal objects like fire, smoke, and dust. The flesh is seen merely as an empty vessel or a garment which is worn by the skeleton, which in death achieves its mastery because it is the only immortal object.

ASL XVI is based on ambiguities and depicts in a single image both the transitory nature of life and the permanence found in death. Randall Jarrell reaches an interesting conclusion in regard

to Housman's treatment of death in this poem. Here is the poem and a summery of Jarrell's argument:

It nods and curtseys and recovers
When the wind blows above,
The nettle on the graves of lovers
That hanged themselves for love.

The nettle nods, the wind blows over,
The man, he does not move,
The lover of the grave, the lover
That hanged himself for love.

(ll. 1-8)

Jarrell considers this as a quasi – philosophical poem meant to infect the reader with Housman's own belief about the cause of any action. That belief involves recognition of the painful and inescapable condition of life, what Jarrell calls the "prosperous evil of the universe." By depicting a nettle as repeating over the grave, compelled by the wind of life, what the man in the grave did once when the gale of life blew through him, the poem implies that living is no more than a repetition of meaningless nodding actions, actions that have not even the virtue of being our own (since the wind forces them out of us). But this general attitude towards life is complicated by the poem in a number of ways. There is irony in a nettle's dancing obviously on the grave of the dead lover, for grass, as a symbol for transitoriness, here outlasts man. The fifth and sixth lines of the poem establish this shocking paradox: a plant

curtseys and nods, while the man, the most active of beings, cannot even move. This is the gloomy message of the poem. But there is also a sense of triumph, the most absolute triumph for man. Once he was tossed about helplessly and incessantly by the wind that blew through him. Now the toughest of all plants is more easily moved than he. In other words, death is better than life, and the recognition of this fact leads to the note of triumph in the poem. Once we acknowledge this note of triumph we may catch the ambiguity of poem's conclusion; that is the possibility that it was the grave, not any living thing that the lover loved, and hanged himself for love of. This is the logic behind the poem, for hanging oneself for love of someone is entirely silly, so far as furthering one's love. But if one is in love with death, suicide is the logical and obvious way to consummate that love. Of course the lover may have been deceived. He might have believed that he killed himself for love of someone, but the implication of the poem is that the lover's one motive must have been the wish for death. Housman does not argue for the truth of that assumption. He merely states it audaciously and innocently as a fact as obvious as the other facts the poem presents about the wind, the nettle, and the grave.

Professor B.J. Leggett remarks:

here is another instance in which Housman gives us a full look at the worst, infects us with his own dark vision, yet manages to defend us against the anxiety of death and leaves us with a sense of victory.²²

In *ASL* LIV, Housman depicts ordinary emotion with great complexity. The poem deals with the sense of loss one feels for the dead. However, in creating this emotion, he tries to suggest both the idea of life's loss through change and the idea of death's ultimate victory over this loss. This suggestion does not occur in the thought of the poem, which is very straightforward and is contained in the first two lines of the poem. But in the pattern of its imagery the idea of death's ultimate victory over the loss can be traced:

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.

By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade.

John Crowe Ransom has objected to the first line of the poem as "painful, grandiloquent, incredible to the naturalistic imagination." He further states:

... I think we must have misgivings as to the propriety of linking this degree of desolation with the loss of friends in wholesale quantities. Grief is not exactly cumulative, not proportionate to the numerical occasions; it is the quality of a single grief rather than the total quantity of all the griefs that we expect to be developed in a poem, if the poem is in the interest of the deepest possible sentiment.²³

This is true, yet the poem is not at all concerned with the death of a particular person. It is an analysis of the consciousness of death and the effect of this consciousness on the speaker. The poem, after all, begins with the narrator's thoughts: "With rue my heart is laden..." Ransom's quibble with laden in line 1 also misses the irony inherent in the poem. The poem depicts the emotion of the narrator in paradoxical terms, which, in turn, parallels the larger paradox developed in the poem. The sense of desolation, or emptiness, is produced by *laden*, which suggests fullness. The sense of stillness in lines 5 and 6 is depicted by *leaping*. The impression of rosininess in lines 7 and 8 is suggested by reference to the fading of the roses. The poem has thus managed to produce

through this imagery simultaneously the stillness of death and the activity of life.

The image of "Golden Friends" in line 2 also contributes to the paradoxical theme of the poem. Although Ransom objects that "the image needs a little specification: Shakespeare's golden lads and girls were in better order by virtue of the contrast of the Chimney-Sweepers,"²⁴ the absence of explicit colour contrast may in fact help the image to perform its function. In both works, golden must be taken in its classical (Golden Age) and physical sense. Just as in alchemy gold represented the perfect mixture of the elements, the lads and girls of Shakespeare's and Housman's lyrics represent the time in which the elements of life are in perfect harmony. In Shakespeare's imagery this gold is turned to dust by time ("Golden lads and girls all must, / As chimney - sweepers, come to dust"). However, the point which has eluded critics of Housman is that, strictly in terms of imagery of the poem, the golden friends escape the decay of time. Housman manages this by transferring the sense of change from the dead youths to the physical world from which they have escaped. The "lightfoot lad" of line 4 is still described as lightfoot in death. However, the brooks he was accustomed to leap in youth are now "too broad for leaping." Likewise, the "rose-lipt

maiden" maintains the complexion of her youth; yet she is sleeping in "fields where roses fade." Housman thus continues the conceit in which death becomes the agent for halting time, and for fixing and maintaining the moment in which life is golden. Change is a property of the living, not of the dead.

Ransom further objects that Housman does not depict very clearly the shameful end which death involves .He states, referring to the rose-lipt girls:

...that does not seem too shameful an end. Roses fade in the best of fields....What we require is an image to carry the fading of the rosy-lips ; to be buried in the ground involves this disgrace sufficiently for brutal logic but not for poetic imagination.²⁵

If the reader is conscious of the continuing conceit about death, he realizes that the poem obviously avoids the suggestion that death brings decay with it. The poem, instead, emphasizes the decay that characterizes life. Housman's seemingly simple statement about death, which Ransom finds inept, becomes more complex on closer examination. In fact, the attitude towards death in the poem is a complex one. Stanza 1 offers an overwhelming sense of grief. But this feeling of loss is altered in stanza 2 because

here death is both a loss and a gain. But this complexity must be seen in the context of the whole of *A Shopshire Lad*, and critics who consider isolated poems may conclude, like Ransom, that

The ironical detail of the poem is therefore fairly inept. The imagination of this poet is not a trained and faithful instrument, or it does not work for him here. That is not an additional charge, however, to saying that the poem as a whole is not very satisfactory, for it is the specific ground of this poem's failure. There cannot be a fine poetry without a fine texture²⁶

The scene of *ASL XXIII* regards death not wholly as a shameful end. The scene of *ASL XXXIII* is Ludlow fair. The narrator watches the hundreds of lads as they arrive from "the burn and the forge and the mill and the fold..." He watches that some of them are there for the girls and some for the liquor, but his interest lies in another group for "there with the rest are the lads that will never be old" (l. 4). It is in the contrast between the first two groups and the last that the central idea of the poem lies. Many of the first groups are, in their prime, handsome and brave:

And many to count are the stalwart, and the brave,
And many the handsome of face and the handsome of heart,
And few that will carry their looks or their truth to the grave.
(ll. 6-8)

The latter group, however, are regarded as “fortunate fellows”, for they will “carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man” (l. 15). The last line of the poem makes clear why these men are to be regarded as fortunate and how they are to preserve the mintage of man. These are “the lads that will die in their glory and never be old” (l. 16).

Again, it would be easy to oversimplify the attitude towards death in this poem and consider death merely as an escape from the misery of existence. Many of Housman’s critics have done so. The point is not that these lads have escaped some sort of evil inherent in life, but instead, they have escaped the change and decay of time. Housman’s coin image suggests that they have preserved something which in itself is valuable.

ASL XLIV deals with a different aspect of life’s mutability. There is a sudden turn of the wheel of fortune with which living man is powerless to contend. Here, the young man takes suicide as a possible means of defeating fate by stopping time:

Shot? so quick, so clean and ending?
Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:
Yours was not an ill for mending,
‘T was best to take it to the grave.

Oh you had forethought, you could reason,
And so your road and where it led,

And early wise and brave in season
Put the pistol to your head.

(ll. 1-8)

Suicide thus becomes justified because, even though death is not desirable, the ills of time and the disgraces of ever-changing fortune are even less desirable: "Dust's your wages son of sorrow,/But men may come to worse than dust" (ll. 15-16). It becomes clear from stanzas 5 and 6 that, again, death is not considered merely as an escape from the evil and injustice of the world. It is, instead a means to "carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man." Man is considered here in generic terms. By committing suicide the lad has saved himself and his fellow men from the dishonour and guilt which his unnamed disgrace would have brought them:

Souls undone, undoing others, —
Long time since the tail began.
You would not live to wrong your brothers:
O lad, you died as fits a man.

Now to your grave shall friend and stranger
With ruth and some with envy come:
Undishonored, clear of danger,
Clean of guilt, pass hence and home.

(ll. 17-24)

The source of the poem casts some further light on these lines.

Laurence Housman writes in his biography of his brother:

On August 6th, 1895, a young Woolwich Cadet, aged eighteen, took his own life, leaving a letter addressed to the Coroner to say why he had done so. The gist of that letter was quoted in a newspaper cutting of the day, which I found lying in my brother's copy of *A Shropshire Lad* alongside the poem which begins:

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?

It is quite evident that certain passages in that letter prompted the writing of the poem; one sentence indeed is almost quoted.²⁷

Laurence Housman then quotes a part of the young Cadet's letter:

I wish it to be clearly understood that I am not what is commonly called 'temporarily insane' and that I am putting an end to my life after several weeks of careful deliberation. I do not think that I need to justify my actions to anyone but my Maker, but.... I will state the main reasons which have determined me. The first is utter cowardice and despair. There is only one thing in this world which would make me thoroughly happy; that one thing I have no earthly hope of obtaining. The second — which I wish was the only one — is that I have

absolutely ruined my own life; but I thank God that as yet, so far as I know, I have not morally injured, or 'offended,' as it is called in the Bible, anyone else. Now I am quite certain that I could not live another five years without doing so, and for that reason alone, even if the first did not exist, I should do what I am doing... At all events it is final, and consequently better than a long series of sorrows and disgraces.²⁸

The last two sentences quoted above must certainly have attracted the attention of Housman to the story, because they parallel the concept of death which is repeated throughout the poems written during this period. The young man died to halt the moral decay which is mentioned in the letter ("I could not live for another five years without doing so,..."). Housman praises the idea in lines 19 and 20 : "you would not live to wrong your bothers:/O lad, you died as fits a man." The last sentence quoted from the letter contains the idea which forms the basis of the concept of death stated most clearly in "To an Athlete Dying Young." The young Cadet wrote, "At all events it is final, and consequently better than a long series of sorrows and disgraces." We can compare Housman's lines: "Oh

soon, and better so than later/After long disgrace and scorn,..."
(ll.9–10)

The Cadet thus becomes successful in escaping the ill fortunes of time. The last stanza of the poem offers him still further compensations:

Turn safe to rest, no dreams, no waking;
And here, man, here's the wreath I've made:
'Tis not a gift that's worth the taking,
But wear it and it will not fade.

(ll.25–28)

The wreath mentioned in line 26 may be explained in two ways. On one level, it is the symbol of victory, the poet's sign that the lad has triumphed over the adversities of time. It will not fade because it is artificial, not organic ("a wreath I've made). But the wreath may also be interpreted as the poem itself (an artifact which is made). The poet thus offers the lad the permanence of art, like the conceit of Shakespeare's sonnet 18. Both poets recognize the mutability of the natural world, where "every fair from fair sometimes declines/By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed." (Sonnet 18, ll.7–8), and both offer the permanence of art to halt decay. Shakespeare argues that through his poem "thy eternal summer shall not fade" (l.9) Housman's statement almost identical: "But wear it and it will not fade."

So Housman uses both death and art in the same manner in this poem and in other lyrics of *A Shropshire Lad*. Yet many critics have ignored this aspect of Housman's view of death in the work. No critic has assumed that Shakespeare believed his poem would literally preserve the beauty of the young man to whom Sonnet 18 is addressed. But Housman's use of similar conceit has been interpreted literally with the resulting judgment that his philosophy is perverse and contradictory. *A Shropshire Lad* is based on the human dilemma of life and death, and this dilemma can be resolved only in paradoxical terms. Cleanth Brooks, in *The Well Wrought Urn*, has argued for the necessity of the statement of paradox:

If the poet ... must perforce dramatize the oneness of the experience, even through paying tribute to its diversity, then his use of paradox and ambiguity is seen as necessary. He is not simply trying to spice up, with a superficially exciting or mystifying rhetoric, the old stale stockpot....He is rather giving us an insight which preserves the unity of experience and which at its higher and more serious levels, triumphs over the

apparently contradictory and conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern.²⁹

It is in this sense that Housman's view of death must be seen. Housman's poetry fails to provide any practical answer to the dilemma posed by time. But it must be agreed that the lyric poet has traditionally not attempted to provide practical answers to life's problems. His poetic answers serve only as occasional insights into the human condition.

Some of Housman's poems can be understood only in terms of Lucretius' atomistic theory. In his 1911 Cambridge Inaugural Lecture, Housman refers to the same scientific and natural laws that governed, thematically and ideologically much of his earlier poetic creativity. Housman had great regard for Lucretius and his ancient philosophy. He once praised the poet-philosopher's *De Rerum Natura* as "a work more compact of excellence than any edition of any classic produced in England."³⁰ "Lucretius's Epicurean ontology profoundly influenced Housman's poetry, particularly in the poet's 1896 volume, *A Shropshire Lad*, while at the same time impinging upon Housman's own interest in the means of human existence and the *topos* of atomic theory —

Lucretian concepts that fathered the notion of ‘the stuff of life’ so prevalent in Housman’s poetry.”³¹

As generally acknowledged by literary critics and philosophers alike, Epicurus (342B.C.–270B.C), had influenced the poetry of both Housman and Lucretius.³² He employed poetry in his landmark study, *On Nature*, to advance his largely scientific arguments.³³ In his work, Epicurus afforded particular emphasis to the notion of free will— an interest that stemmed largely from his conclusions about atoms and their tendencies to swerve of their own accord.³⁴ Epicurean philosophy *per se* functions upon three basic principles. First, Epicurus argues that all pleasure is good, while all evil is bad. The second basic tenet of Epicurean philosophy arises directly from the concepts of good and evil. Epicurus believed that death was a natural part of humanity— an experience not to be feared, but to be embraced.³⁵ He further argues that to the living, death remains an unknown quantity, thus producing an understandable fear. Epicurus believed that such a fear was ludicrous because man has no basis for understanding the experience of death. Only the expectation of it: “Foolish,

therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect”³⁶

The final principal tenet of Epicurean philosophy relates to the existence of atoms. Epicurus drew his conclusions regarding atoms from another ancient philosopher, Democritus (born 460 — 457 B.C.), who identified atoms as the basic forms of matter. Epicurus believed that atoms were both indivisible and indestructible, and thus they could not be created by men. Accordingly, Epicurus believed that the body in its living state made up of a finite number of atoms that comprised the human soul. According to the Epicurean ontology, when the body enters the state of death, its atoms are immediately dispersed into the world, thus becoming free to form another being. In this manner, Epicurus offers an important observation about the mortality of the human soul and suggests that through death, the body and soul enter into a permanent state of non-existence.³⁷

Lucretius embraced Epicurus’ three principal tenets and his forays into atomic theory.³⁸ Lucretius explores the Epicurean belief that death remains an unknown experience — again, an experience not to be feared but embraced. Lucretius wrote: “Often through fear of death men come to hate life and the sight of the sun

so bitterly that in burst of grief they kill themselves, forgetting that it was this fear that caused their cares, troubled their conscience, broke their bonds of friendship, overturned all sense of decency”.³⁹ Thus, according to Lucretius, the fear of death breeds a fear of living.

Lucretius also replicates Epicurus’ early examinations of atomic theory. In the preface to his discussion of atoms in Book Three of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius, defines the existence of the soul and its place within the body: “First, I speak of the soul (sometimes called ‘mind’), in which life’s thoughts and governments are placed; it’s no less part of a man than hand and foot and eyes are part of the total living creature”.⁴⁰ Atoms, in this Epicurean sense, are the virtual life-force of the living body. Like Epicurus, Lucretius also demonstrates the phenomenon of atomic dispersal when the body dies. Life, according to the Epicurean argument, creates the restraint that holds the atoms within the body. In death, however, the atoms are released to pursue their own free will. As Lucretius writes: “Say it again: when allure fleshy husk is loosened, and the breath of life cast out, you must admit that sensate soul and mind break up; a single life links soul and body”⁴¹ In this way, Lucretius suggests that with the exodus of

atoms, the body and the soul cease to exist. Lucretius, in addition to making observations regarding the human fear of death, alleges that immortality and after life are non-existent and impossible entities within 'the nature of things'.

Like Epicurus and Lucretius before him, Thomas Henry Huxley revealed two thousand years later that atoms arise out of ordinary matter to become composite forms during life while returning to the realm of ordinary matter in death. Death, according to Huxley, is a natural state of lifelessness, as well as a process that ultimately begins with birth. Housman's poetry and prose contain several examples of Epicurean concepts, particularly in relation to atomic theory, mortality and human fear of death. As his brother Laurence recalled, in religious matters Housman approved of the Church of England as an institution, yet possessed no faith in its tenets.⁴² Critics such as Richard Perceval Graves ascribe Housman's affinity for the philosophies of Epicurus and Lucretius — and later that of Huxley— to their atheism. Housman believed that the soul was as mortal as the body and had strong reservations about the notion of immortality. As Norman Marlow argues, "One can sense in Housman, as in Huxley, Romanes, and other agnostics of the late nineteenth century, the underlying

bewilderment and anguish of a soul naturally Christian....yet to call Housman a Christian, as some have done, is of course nonsense”⁴³

Like Lucretius, Housman believed that the human fear of death prevents any real and productive means of existence. An examination of his poetry reveals the manner in which he employs the tenets of atomic theory to demonstrate the vacuous nature of human life in an enduring face of death.

In *ASL XXXI*, Housman offers images of the gale of life as it blows through the fictive terrain of the poet’s Shropshire. The gale spreads the ashes and atoms of the narrator’s human precursors among the shadows of his fleeting existence:

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
Then ‘twas Roman, now ‘tis I.

The gale, it piles the saplings double,
It blows so hard, ‘twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.

(ll. 13–20)

Norman Page argues that the movements of the wind in *A Sheopshire Lad* function as a poetic manoeuvre that enables Housman to forge a temporal link between the ancient past, a

dismal present and an uncertain future: “The wind blows not just through a human life but through history,” Page writes; “the wind of the distant past...links dead Roman and Victorian Englishman.”⁴⁴ In this way, Housman alludes — through his references to the enduring winds of ancient Uricon— to the phenomenon that Tom Burns Haber calls the “unending cycle of atomic dissolution and recombination” prevalent throughout the poet’s verse⁴⁵

Housman uses similar images of the wind in *ASL XXXII*. The poet’s insistence upon the value of atomic theory and its ancient philosophical properties also affirms Page’s assertion that “almost any individual poem in *A Shropshire Lad* has a total meaning that is partly supplied by its relationship to other poems in the collection. This relationship may be thematic or it may be a matter of recurrent diction or imagery.”⁴⁶ In *ASL XXXII*, the narrator discusses the existence of atoms— the ‘stuff of life’ — and the way in which they combined to form his very being:

From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

In the second stanza, the narrator warns that he has not yet 'dispersed', referring to his own inevitable death and the atomic dissolution. Through this classical metaphor, the narrator acknowledges the fleeting nature of his existence:

Now —for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart—
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.

John Bayley argues that this poem offers additional images of "urgency...heightened into mysteriousness"— emotions intensified by Housman's arguments, via Lucretius, regarding the tenuous nature of human life. As John Bayley concludes: "A lifetime should be enough for any number of such exchanges, but the poem sees the whole of it as a moment." ⁴⁷

Housman concludes in poems such as "Loveliest of Trees" that an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to experience it more intensely. In many of the poems, however, the recognition of transience and decay leads to the desire for the release of death rather than a more meaningful participation in life. It is the second element of the theme that has led many critics to dismiss Housman as a bitter pessimist who exposes the tragic side of life.

Some other critics, however, find that Housman answers the question of life and death in contradictory ways. *A Shropshire Lad* is based on the human dilemma of life and death, and this dilemma can be resolved only in paradoxical terms. To be fully understood it must be seen in relation to the concern with permanence and change, innocence and experience, which lies at the heart of the work. In his 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* Hardy denied the charge of pessimism. Housman had similar problems and made his own attempts to distance himself from the charge of pessimism. I have already quoted from the letter to Houston Martin where he calls pessimism 'silly' and himself a pejorist as opposed to a meliorist. And in his poetry he sounds a note very similar to the line from his own work which Hardy quotes:

Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.
(ASL LXII)

It is possible that both these writers would have embraced pessimism, but they did not want to be thought of as people who could only see the dark side of things. They both wanted to make it clear that they had arrived at their positions after due

consideration of the evidence; as Housman pointed out in the letter to Houston Martin, his pejorism was arrived at “owing to my observation of the world, not to personal circumstances”⁴⁸

Housman’s poetry— often praised by his critics for its simplicity of form and meaning— in fact offers little in the way of poetic resolution. As John Peale Bishop remarks: “Despite an apparent clarity such that almost any poem seems ready to deliver its meaning at once, there is always something that is not clear, something not brought into the open, something that is left in doubt.”⁴⁹ So our discussion of the ideals of Epicurus, Lucretius, and the very ‘stuff of life’ upon which their philosophies function, will demonstrate the complexity of the philosophy of Housman’s poetry, which has its roots in the very confusion and doubt of which Bishop speaks. Like those ancient philosophers, Housman believed that the human fear of death prevents any real and productive means of existence. An examination of his poetry reveals the manner in which he employs the tenets of atomic theory to demonstrate the vacuous nature of human life in an enduring face of death.

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Chapter- 3

Theme of Soldiering

A. E. Housman was greatly fascinated by soldiering and the accidents of military life. A large number of his poems, including some of his best ones, are on military and warlike themes. An early photograph of Housman, aged seven, and his brother Robert, shows them in the garden with their home-made rifles. His father, Mr. Edward Housman was interested in rifle-shooting. He was a keen member of Bromsgrove Volunteer Rifle Corps. Robert's approach to life was materially altered because of his closeness with Birmingham Small Arms Company, Kynoch; where he was a ballistics expert. However, the most important source for Housman's compassion for the desperate young soldier was his youngest brother, George Herbert Housman. Herbert's letters from the Burmese campaign of 1891 and 1892, have been treasured for many years by the Symons family. A few serialized in *The Housman society Journal*. It was to Lucy, his stepmother, "My dearest Mater", that Herbert was to write letters from the front in

Burma. Herbert's battalion fought in the Boer War of 1901. He was hit by a machine gun while leading a charge of the mounted infantry. Corporal Hobden wrote to Lucy on 1st November that Herbert's Corps "lay on the open veldt all night in the pouring rain... with only his underclothing...the Boers having stripped him of every thing."¹ The elder brother was profoundly influenced by the experiences of the younger brother. The fact of his death inspired writing or re-writing of some of Alfred's greatest poetry. *A Shropshire Lad* was published in 1896, but most of the poems were written in the spring of 1893, less than three years after Herbert's letters from Burma. Herbert's story must have been fresh in Alfred's mind when he wrote several of the poems. Spencer Blackett, the manager at Kegan Paul (Publisher), was particularly fascinated with the military element and wanted *A Shropshire Lad* to be renamed as "a romance of enlistment". When Housman's nephew, Clement Symons, third son of his sister Kate, was killed in action in 1916, he wrote to her:

My dear Kate,

I have been scanning the casualty lists in these last days, and when I saw your card this morning I

feared what the news must be. Well, my dear, it is little I or anyone else can do to comfort you, or think of anything to say that you will not have thought of. But I remember your telling me at the beginning of the war that he had almost a hope and expectation of dying in battle, and we must be glad that it was a victorious battle in which he died. I don't know that I can do better than to send you some verses that I wrote many years ago; because the essential business of poetry, as it has been said, is to harmonize the sadness of the universe, and it is somehow more sustaining and healing than prose. Do assure Edward of my feeling for you all, and also, though I do not know her, the poor young girl.

Your affectionate brother, A.E. Housman.²

Housman donated generously to the fighting funds. In response to the Chancellor's appeal in 1914 he gave the whole of his current bank balance, said to be five hundred pounds, a massive sum for those days. There is a hidden touch of sentimentality behind Housman's view of war. He told Grant

Richards that he wanted a copy of *A Shrophshire Lad* to be available to every soldier and thus cheap, for an important motive.

I don't make any particular complaint about your doubling the price of my book, but of course it diminishes the sale and therefore diminishes my chances of the advertisement to which I am always looking forward: a soldier is to receive a bullet in the breast and it is to be turned aside from his heart by a copy of *A Shrophshire Lad* which he is carrying there. Hitherto it is only the Bible which has performed this trick.³

Something like this in fact came about: Housman carefully treasured a letter from an American soldier who had written to say that, in comforting a wounded British infantryman, he had offered him his copy of *A Shropshire Lad*. But the British soldier had responded by taking from his pocket his own bloodstained copy.

After Housman's death, his copy of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was found to have a marginal note beside one of T.E.

Lawrence's more tortured passages of self-examination: "This is me."

Writing in the *Edwardian* magazine in 1936, Kate Symons put it like this:

A.E.H. often performed quiet acts of unobtrusive generosity. Consideration of the feelings of people comfortably off he certainly had not; but to a painful degree, he was capable of compassion for suffering, and resentment against the miseries of the world. Students of his poems find this strain in them, as, also, his admiration for those who bear hardships bravely. During the Great War he showed practical concern for his four Edwardian nephews who were with the fighting forces. On its outbreak, he sent £ 100 to help in equipping the three who left civilian life to join the army; and when N.V.H.S., the youngest of them, lost his left hand, he made particular request to be allowed to supply an artificial hand to make good the loss as far as possible.⁴

Housman's compassion extended far beyond his feelings for the common soldier. He told his brother Basil in 1927 that he had met the American defence lawyer Clarence Darrow, and had clearly been moved by the latter's account of criminals facing capital punishment:

I had a visit no long ago from Clarence Darrow, the great American barrister for defending murderers. He had only a few days in England, but he could not return home without seeing me, because he had so often used my poems to rescue his clients from the electric chair. Loeb and Leopold owe their life sentence partly to me; and he gave me a copy of his speech, in which, sure enough, two of my pieces are misquoted.⁵

Yet publicly, Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War, and cynical about its motives. In 1993 he wrote to Maurice Pollet:

"The great war cannot have made much change in the opinions of any man of imagination."⁶

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Lily Thicknesse received this ironic comment:

...The thirst for blood is raging among the youth of England. More than half the undergraduates are away, but mostly not at front, because they all want to be officers. I am going out when they make me a Field-Marshal. Meanwhile I have three nephews being inoculated for typhoid and catching pneumonia on Salisbury Plain and performing other acts of War calculated to make the German Emperor realize that he is a very misguided man...⁷

Soldiering is one of the most important aspects of Housman's poetry. But this feature of his poetry has not been systematically studied. Critics have long tried to explain the reasons for his obsession with certain type of characters, particularly the soldier and the young criminal. Most of the explanations are biographical. According to Stephen Spender, Housman's poetry seems to hide "some nagging Housman secret."⁸ Like so many other critics, he suggests that personal tragedy is concealed in the poetry. Many readers give more importance to his personality than his poetry. Norman Marlow says that soldiers attracted Housman "by their colourful uniforms and their destiny," and again because they are "men

paid to die" and in another place, because of their "relentless pursuit of glory,"⁹ To John Bayley, "His soldiers provide a refuge between the duty of loneliness and the longing for community," and they gave "Housman a lot of happiness."¹⁰ According to his biographer George L. Watson, a soldier might be "often susceptible to his own sex" appealed to Housman's invert imaginings, and Housman yearned towards "the gallant bearing and the ripe masculinity of men in uniform,"¹¹ In sharp contrast, he felt through his own disasters "a sense of closer kinship with their unhappy lot."¹²

John Stevenson says that all of these figures are identical with "the only character of the poems, the Shropshire Lad."¹³ It may be true, but it does not answer the more basic question of why Housman chose to deal with these particular types. However, Stevenson does make an effort to explain why the rustic personality is central to the meaning of the poems:

If the theme of the response of innocence to experience and to action is the right one, it helps to place the Shropshire lad in a more dramatic position; his effect on the reader is more than a "literary" example of

childish petulance and rebellion against society. We have only to turn to poetry, to point out specific situations, to perceive that the “lad” of the poems, whether soldier, lover, or sinner, is himself a discoverer. Almost always Housman presents him at the moment when the reality is made apparent, forever after which he must, like Mithridates, “sample all the killing store,” and forever after which he knows that “happiness” and “pleasure” are illusions, that life, while perhaps not a sham, is something of a hoax, and that meaning comes only through struggle.¹⁴

Soldiering is a public responsibility. Soldiers are the defenders of a country. The sacrifices made by soldiers in defending their motherland always won Housman’s admiration. Soldiers in his poetry have all those public or conventional values that are traditionally related to soldiering. In a single couplet Housman sets up these three values:

Duty, friendship, bravery o’er,
Sleep away, lad; Wake no more.
(*LP XXIX*, ll.23-24)

In “The Recruit”, a new recruit is introduced to his task. National or patriotic feeling is also added to his duty:

And you will list the bugle
That blows in lands of morn
And make the foes of England
Be sorry, you were born.

(ASL III, ll.17-20)

And in "1887," the first poem in *A Shropshire Lad* which celebrates the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887, God is rejected as the force which has "Saved the Queen" for half a century:

Now, when the flame they watch not towers
About the soil they trod,
Lads, we'll remember the friends of ours
That shared the work with God.

(ll.9-12)

Queen Victoria symbolizes duty and her welfare is the national objective. But the important point is this, that the British soldier, in the work of saving the Queen, "Shared the work with God." We are told of those who saved the Queen that "Themselves they could not save." The soldiers in the poem became "saviours".

To skies that knit their hearstrings right,
To fields that bred them brave,
The saviours come not home to-night:
Themselves they could not save

(ll.13-16)

The last line suggests The New Testament, Matthew 27: 42., where the chief priests, scribes and elders mock Christ by saying, "He saved others; himself he cannot save." Associating

these words with the British soldiers signifies that they are the Christs of the contemporary world on whose shoulders the fate of the crown rests.

This poem and "Epitaph for an Army of Mercenaries" has the same subject matter and caused some controversy in their attitude towards war, religion and patriotism. The latter is the poet's reply to Kaiser Wilhelm's contemptuous joke about professionalism in the British Army:

These, on the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay
(LP XXXVII)

I agree with Cleanth Brooks when he says;

But can one really be hired to die? Do Housman's "mercenaries" save the sum of things, as the poet asserts they do, "for pay"? Isn't there a concealed idealism after all, despite the poet's refusal to allow anything more than the materialistic reason? Of course there is, and this, I suppose, is the point that the poem is making: that the courage to stand and die rather than to run away,

usually comes from something like *esprit de corps* or professional pride or even from a kind of instinctive manliness rather than from adherence to the conventional rubrics of patriotism and duty.¹⁵

We can place the logical argument (If ... but since ... therefore) of ASL LVI "The Day of the Battle", beside Ricks's argument:

"Comrade, if to turn and fly
Made a soldier never die,
Fly I would, for who would not?
'Tis sure no pleasure to be shot.

"But since the man that runs away
Lives to die another day,
And coward's funerals, when they come,
Are not wept so well at home,

"Therefore, though the best is bad,
Stand and do the best, my lad;
Stand and fight and see your slain,
And take the bullet in your brain."

(ll. 5-16)

The Great War was a nerve shattering experience. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* reflects this tragic gloom and despair of the post-war world. The tragedy of everyday life has induced in the poet a mood of disillusionment. But Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War. However, in assigning causes for the war he abdicated that role.

The olive in its orchard
 Should prosper and abide;

 Close should the fruit be clustered
 And light the leaf should wave,
 So deep the root is planted
 In the corrupting grave.
 (AP XXIII)

Military friendship and community is another important characteristic of Housman's poetry. In the very first attempt to write a poem about soldiers, he wrote:

The street sounds to the soldiers' tread'
 And out we troop to see:
 A single redcoat turns his head,
 He turns and looks at me.

My man, from sky to sky's so far,
 We never crossed before:
 Such leagues apart the world's ends are,
 We're like to meet no more;

What thoughts at heart have you and I
 We cannot stop to tell;
 But dead or living, drunk or dry,
 Soldier, I wish you well

(ASL XXII, ll. 1-12)

"A single redcoat" who turns his head becomes 'my man' in the second verse, and a plain soldier in the last. It shows extreme intimacy or friendship between the speaker and the soldier.

Many of his lyrics went on to lament friendship broken by death; which is the inevitable fate of Housman's soldier. He mourns:

A soldier cheap to king
And dear to me.
(*MP XL*, ll 7-8)

And lyric XXXV of *ASL*

Dear to friends and food for powder,
Soldiers marching, all to die.
(ll. 7-8)

Nor can we ignore a somewhat romanticized picture of a friend
who is dead and forgotten:

East and west on fields forgotten
Bleach the bones of comrades slain,
Lovely lads and dead and rotten
None that go return again.
(*ASL XXXV*, 9-12)

And again in *ASL LX*, although the central theme of death is
not directly mentioned:

Square your shoulders, lift your pack,
And leave your friends and go
(ll. 3-4)

When he says, "I will sit me down and weep for bones in
Africa" (*LP XVII*), he seems to mean his brother, Sergeant
George Housman, killed in the Transvall; but as his
manuscripts show, he had caught the tone long before the
bereavement.

A large number of subsidiary fancies are related to the
central one. Housman made use of these very frankly and
cleverly. A battlefield deserter has no room in Housman's

world. Automatically he turns up with broken heart in several poems:

My dreams are of a field afar,
And blood and smoke and shot.
There in their graves my comrades are,
In my grave I am not.

I too was taught the trade of man
And spelt the lesson plain;
But they, when I forgot and ran,
Remembered and remain.

(MP XXXIX)

His friends “remembered and remained” while he forgot and ran” because of cowardice. Housman was a lonely scholar, but he was always a supporter of unity and synchronization in military effort. His soldiers move in columns, and they fall down in rows.

“I will go where I am wanted, where there’s room for one or two,
And the men are none too many for the work there is to do;
Where the standing line wears thinner and the dropping dead lie
thick;

(ASL XXXIV)

This closeness of man to man is superior to the love of man for woman. A soldier bedded with a girl suddenly awakens:

And where am I?
My friends are up and dressed and dying,
And I will dress and die.

(LP. XIII, 10-12)

Some others try to continue the comradeship ideal even beyond the grave. The ceaseless activity of living friends troubles them:

Over the dead men roar
Battles they lost before
(AP XIX)

While still others even hear political news coming through the fertile land above their grave:

Oh is it my country calling,
And whom will my country find?
.....
Oh is it the newsboys crying
Lost battle, retreat, despair,
And honor and England dying?
(AP XIV)

In two poems, Housman comes out of the regional attitude to include the official enemy. Here too he is utterly conventional.

Once he said, "I lost my heart":

I lost it to a soldier and a foeman
A chap who did not kill me, but he tried;
That took the sabre straight, and took it striking
And laughed and kissed his hand to me and died.
(MP XXXVII)

From this he moves to the solidly natural imagery of his "Soldier from the wars returning."

Now no more of winters biting,
Filth in trench from fall to spring,
Summers full of sweat and fighting
For the Kesar and the King.

Rest you, charger, rust you, bridle,
Kings and Kesars, keep your pay;
Soldier, sit you down and idle
In the inn of night for aye.

(*LP VIII*. 9 – 16)

Courage and stoic endurance are the two constant themes of Housman's poetry. These are the themes which are almost obsessive for several of our best contemporary writers.

Housman presented his battle casualties as:

Fellows who were good and brave
And died because they were.

(*LP XXXVIII*, 9-10)

The lads of rural Shropshire lived among accidents and encountered unusually serious difficulties. There are some hidden motives behind the soldier's symbolic march into the battle:

Far the calling bugles hollo,
High the screaming fife replies;
Gay the files of scarlet follow;
Woman bore me: I will rise.

(*ASL XXXV*, 13-16)

Through earth and out of life,
The soldiers follow
.....

And down the distance they
With dying note and swelling
Walk the resounding way
To the still dwelling.

(*LP VII*, 7-8, 17-20)

Housman's soldiers, like his civilians, had the death wish. His sister, Katherine E. Symons, recalled in her

memorable tribute to him that he had enclosed a copy of his poem "Illic Jacet", with a letter of condolence when one of her sons was killed in France. He asserted that her boy had been "in love with the grave," and now lay "with the sweetheart he chose" (*LP IV*). A girl in another poem is bitter:

Their love is for their own undoing,
And East and west
They scour about the world a -wooing
The bullet to their breast.
(*LP XIII*, 28-32)

An equally confusing problem arose from the fact that in much of his poetry, Housman expressed the view that life was not better than death, and might be worse. The cosmos is viewed as a torture chamber created by a "brute and blackguard,"

In some of his poems, Housman shows the pain and sorrow certainly involved in the act of dying. Says one soldier:

"Comarade, it to turn and fly
Made a soldier never die,
Fly I would, for who would not?
'Tis sure no pleasure to be shot.
(*ASL LVI*, 5-8)

Housman's young grenadier recruit is made to die hard:

My mouth is dry, my shirt is wet,
My blood runs all away.
(*LP V*, 9 - 10)

When Housman was a professor at London University he accepted a lunch invitation from Frank Harris and some of his journalist friends. They tried to flatter the author by praising 'the bitter sarcasm' or 'unpatriotic attitude' of the first poem in *A Shropshire Lad*. This celebrates the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887. Harris thought that the sentences like –

'Because 'tis fifty years to night
That God has saved the Queen.
(ASL I, ll. 7-8)

Or The New Testament allusion:

The saviours come not home to –night
Themselves they could not save.
(ll. 15-16)

have a distinctly anti-war message behind them. From their own point of view they were right, but they did not recognize that what they thought of as sarcasm or irony here has an unexpected and different use.

"God save the Queen." we living sing,
From height to height 'tis heard;
And with the rest your voices ring,
Lads of the Fifty –third.

Oh, God will save, her, fear you not:
Be you the men you've been,
Get you the sons your fathers got,
And God will save the Queen.
(ll. 25-32)

John Bayley writes, "Housman uses the voice of sarcasm to make his point with a very special and personal simplicity and fervour and also piety."¹⁶

As a matter of fact, Housman's own views on the ending of his poem are on record. Frank Harris, in his *"Latest Contemporary Portraits,"* tells of a talk with Housman about this poem. He writes:

I recited the last verse as if it had been bitter sarcasm which in all sincerity I had taken it for and I went on: "It stirs my blood to find an Englishman so free of the insensate snobbishness that corrupts all true values here. I remember telling Kipling once that when he mixed his patriotism with snobbery it became disgusting to me; and here you have poked fun at the whole thing and made splendid mockery of it.

To my astonishment, Housman replied sharply: "I never intended to poke fun, as you call it, at patriotism, and I can find nothing in the sentiment to make mockery of: I meant it sincerely; if Englishmen breed as good men as their fathers, then God will save their Queen." His own words seemed to have excited him for he added precisely

but with anger: "I can only reject and resent your – your truculent praise."¹⁷

Harris and his friends were no doubt amused at having angered the poet. Housman loved soldiers because he was naturally patriotic and more importantly because soldiers represented for him a whole world of romance and love. So the "Lads of the Fifty-third", are a sacred talisman, placed by the poet at the front of his book:

Now, when the flame they watch not towers
About the soil they trod,
Lads, we'll remember friends of ours
Who shared the work with God.

To skies that knit their heartstrings right,
To fields that bred them brave,
The saviours come not home to-night:
Themselves they could not save.

(11. 9-16),

In one sense they were right: the poem is irreverent - about Queen, soldiers, the Empire and life itself. None of its honours and glories can or will be saved. However, the poem contains its own irreverence inside the very deep reverence it has for the Queen and her army. This intermingling of both heartfelt and humorous can be found in Housman's own public and private personalities.

Professor B, J. Leggett writes:

The tone betrays no trace of sarcasm, and the function of Housman's redefinition of the phrase which expresses that patriotism is not mockery but the revelation of his persona's insight into the human condition in which patriotism finds its real meaning. The structure of the poem involves a process of revelation, and the repetition of the cant phrase in its different contexts carries the shifts in tone which reveal the growing insight of the persona. Shifting the burden of salvation from God to man does not lessen the speaker's admiration for the heroism involved in "Saving" the Queen, nor do I find the bitterness in his attitude which some commentators have noted.¹⁸

In an essay Cleanth Brooks adds:

"A pious sentiment, a patriotic cliché is suddenly taken seriously and is made to work in a normal English sentence. It is as shocking as if a bishop had suddenly used his crozier... to lay hold upon a live sheep."¹⁹

In his masterly essay on Housman, Christopher Ricks has suggested that the poet is positively, and deliberately, blasphemous here; and all the more so because the reference to the supreme sacrifice of Christ is so deadpan and unobtrusive. 'He saved others;

himself he cannot save'. And yet in terms of his own personality Housman is being not so much blasphemous, as quietly and even innocently sober. He is indeed dead serious, and yet a joke lurks in this very seriousness, for the idea of giving God a hand in this work of saving the Queen is something that would have given the troops a certain amount of amusement.

Cleanth Brooks sides with Housman against Harris and says that the use of the phrase 'God save the Queen' in the poem "does not necessarily involve mockery of the Queen or the young men who have helped her".²⁰ But he judges that Housman went too far to say there was no irony in the poem:

The speaker clearly admires the lads of the Fifty-third but his angle of vision is different from theirs. What they accept naively and uncritically, he sees in its full complexity and ambiguity. But his attitude is not cynical and it is consonant with genuine patriotism. The irony that it contains is a mature and responsible irony whose focus is never blurred. The closing stanza, with its quiet insistence that God will save the Queen but with the conjoined insistence on the all-important proviso that they get them the sons their fathers got dramatizes the speaker's attitude to a nicety.²¹

The discussion of the theme of soldiering evinces that Housman was greatly fascinated by soldiering and the accidents of military life. The most important source for Housman's compassion for the desperate young soldier was his youngest brother, Herbert. Herbert's battalion took part in the Boar War of 1901, and he was killed in action. The fact of his death inspired writing or re-writing of some of Alfred's greatest poetry. In a letter to his sister Kate, Housman wrote that the essential business of poetry was to harmonize the sadness of the universe. Yet publicly, Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War and cynical about its motives.

Duty, friendship, and bravery are the three public or conventional values that Housman expects to find in a soldier. The sacrifices made by soldiers in defending their motherland always won his admiration. Military friendship and community is another important characteristic of Housman's poetry. Many of the lyrics lament friendship broken by death, which is the inevitable fate of Housman's soldier. Courage and stoic endurance are the two constant themes of Housman's poetry. In some of the poems, Housman shows the pain and sorrow certainly involved in the act of dying.

The first poem of *A Shropshire Lad*, “1887”, and “Epitaph for an Army of Mercenaries” has the same subject matter and caused some controversy in their attitude towards war, religion and patriotism.

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
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8. "The Essential Housman," in *The Making of a Poem* (London, 1955), p. 159.
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16. John Bayley, op cit., p. 122.
17. Cleanth Brooks, op. cit p. 76.
18. B.J. Leggett, *The Poetic Art of A.E. Housman: Theory And Practice* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978) pp. 71-72.
19. John Bayley, op. cit., p. 123.
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Chapter- 4

Theme of Love

Housman's concept of love is very different from that, to cite a single example, which Shakespeare presents in his sonnet CXVI ("Let Me Not To The Marriage of True Minds"). According to Shakespeare, love is not true if it undergoes a change because of a change in the attitude of the beloved. He compares love to the northern star which remains fixed in the sky at one place. True love is never influenced by the tricks which time plays upon it. Ultimately Shakespeare says that if his own love for his friend is proved to be inconstant, then he would be compelled to admit that whatever he has written in his life should be treated as unwritten, and that no man has ever loved anybody truly:

Admit impediments, love is not love,
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

.....

Love's not Time's fool,.....

If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

(ll.2-5,9,13-14)

We can compare this sonnet with one of the finest lyrics of Housman— *ASL XXVII* ("Is my team ploughing"). In this poem Housman uses love as a symbol of change. It deals with two kinds of love— the love of a friend and the love of a sweetheart. But neither of the two is fixed and unchanging. Love, like life, is characterized by an inconstancy and brevity. Housman regards love as a relationship between men and women which is perhaps governed by a psychological necessity. The relationship ends, as usual in his love poems, in death. Stephen Spender makes an interesting comparison between the love poems of Donne and Housman. He is also of the view that Housman's verse is devoid of the "honesty and audacity" of Hopkins. As regards the treatment of the theme of love in the poetry of Housman, it does not have, in an adequate measure, the qualities of wit, ratiocination and imagery which characterize Donne's love poetry.

The heart (in *ASL XIII*) differs from pearls and crowns because it cannot be given away. The imagery of buying and selling makes it clear that love is of a different nature from "crowns and pounds and guineas." The "wise man" knows that pearls and rubies may be given away but not the heart. It is impossible to give, for something is always gotten in return. The heart is always sold, and the price is "endless rue." The ideal love

of "one-and-twenty" characterized by a sense of permanence is replaced by the disillusionment of "two-and-twenty":

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
"Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free."
But I was one-and-twenty,
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard him say again,
"The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue."
And I am two-and-twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

Michael Macklem has noted Housman's frequent use of love as a traditional symbol of the intensity and brevity of happiness.¹ Stevenson has spoken of Housman's lover as one who is "aware of the inevitability of death and decay, aware of the ambiguity of honor and love, accepts the moment of fulfillment as the only reality."² Yet, as Stevenson further states, the lover in Housman's poetry soon discovers the transitory nature of love, and his commitment ends in frustration. That is why love frequently functions as a basis for the treatment of human transience in Housman's poetry.

Lovers in Housman's poems, like his soldiers, are always dying and being replaced by other lovers. By his constant

identification of love and death, Housman establishes a close correlation between love and the theme of impermanence of human existence. The idea of dying for one's fellow men is, in fact, the secret route by which Housman's homosexuality finds expression. Emphasizing the interconnection of the two experiences, Tom Burns Heber states: "When Housman mentions the sex-embrace he usually casts the odor of death around it."³ So even after a cursory glance of the work, a reader get the impression that death is somehow central to the theme and mood of *A Shropshire Lad*. Stephen Spender commented long ago that, despite this prevalence, there is so little feeling for the dead, or curiosity about death. Three successive lyrics XXV, XXVI and XXVII from *ASL*, illustrate the poet's fusion of love and death. All three poems deal with a triangle of lovers in which one is now in the grave. *ASL* XXVII depicts the inconsistency of love with the unrealistic situation of a dead lover speaking from the grave. It is a poem in the form of a dialogue between a dead man and his friend. The dead man enquires whether life goes on the same without him:

"Is my team ploughing,
That I was used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
When I was man alive?"

Ay, the horses trample,
The harness jingles now;

No change though you lie under
The land you used to plough
(II. 1–8)

The first four stanzas emphasize the changelessness of the scene the dead man has left. The cycle of life has continued unaltered. The friend tells him that his horses still plough, the men still play football and his girl is indeed happy: “No change though you lie under/The land you used to plough.” In the last four stanzas the dead man shifts his attention to his sweetheart and his friend. He wants to know about the state of the surviving lover and asks:

“Is my girl happy,
That I thought hard to leave,
And has she tired of weeping
As she lies down at eve?”
(II. 17–20)

The living friend replies:

Ay, she lies down lightly,
She lies not down to weep:
Your girl is well contented.
Be still, my lad, and sleep
(II.21-24)

But the dead ploughman is not satisfied, and he continues his innocent queries leading to the revelation of the final stanzas:

“Is my friend hearty,
Now I am thin and pine,
And has found to sleep in
A better bed than mine?”

Yes, lad, I lie easy,
I lie as lads would choose;
I cheer a dead man’s sweetheart,
Never ask me whose.
(II. 25–32)

The last stanza emphasizes the irony that is inherent in the poem. His friend acknowledges the transitory nature of man's existence on earth when he asserts the permanence of life that the dead man has left behind. Housman uses love as a symbol of change. He talks of two kinds of love in his poetry— the love of a friend and the love of a sweetheart. Neither of the two is permanent and unchanging. The dead youth asks if his sweetheart has "tired of weeping," as if physical tiredness were the only force which could end her grief. The last stanza of the poem destroys the dead youth's notion of love's permanence as an illusion. Love, like life, is characterized by an inconstancy and transience which is emphasized further by the juxtaposition of the lover and the grave. The poem states the deplorable fact that just as the sweetheart does not mourn her dead lover ("She lies not down to weep"), the dead man's friend is also not hesitant about cheering her up because he, by doing so, expects to win her affections.

ASL XXV depicts the same situation from a different point of view – that of a lover who steals a dead man's sweetheart:

The better man she walks with still,
Though now 'tis not with Fred:
At lad that lives and has his will
Is worth a dozen dead.

Fred keeps the house all kinds of weather,
And clay's the house he keeps;

When Rose and I walk out together
Stock-still lies Fred and sleeps.

(II. 9–16)

ASL XXVI completes the triangle by projecting the affair from the third point of view— that of the lover who accepts a new sweetheart after the death of the old one:

Along the fields as we came by
A year ago, my love and I,
The aspen over stile and stone
Was talking to itself alone.
“Oh, who are these that kiss and pass?
A country lover and his lass;
Two lovers looking to be wed;
And time shall put them both to bed,
But she shall lie with earth above,
And he beside another love.”

(II. 1–10)

The last stanza of the poem reveals that the forecast of the aspen tree, a traditional symbol of prophecy,⁴ has indeed been fulfilled: “And sure enough beneath the tree / There walks another love with me” (II. 11-12). This poem also highlights the true pathos of love and its inconstancy by suggesting that the memory of love is short. A lover who dies is quickly forgotten and betrayed by the surviving partner. Like many other, says Bayley, “the poem is frank about enjoying its own sad tale and its unillusioned acceptance of the way thing go.”⁵ The aspen is whispering to the young man that he “shall sleep with clover clad” and “his girl beside another lad”:

And overhead the aspen heaves
Its rainy-sounding silver leaves;

And I spell nothing in their stir,
But now perhaps they speak to her,
And plain for her to understand
They talk about a time at hand
When I shall sleep with clover clad,
And she beside another lad.

(II.13–20)

These three poems describe the same theme from different viewpoints. “Each is concerned with the destructive power of time, and each develops its theme by concentrating on the ephemeral nature of those feeling and emotions which are traditionally regarded as the most enduring – love and the memory of the dead.”⁶

‘Bredon Hill’, *ASL XXI* is a poem in which an inherently melodramatic situation is presented. It opens with a wonderful description of the ringing of the church bells in the neighbouring shires. The speaker, who is accompanied by his sweetheart on Bredon Hill, is not able to attend the Sunday service because he is engaged in wooing her.

In summertime on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.

Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.

(II. 1–10)

The two young lovers dismiss the summons of the church bells.
In their own happiness they reinterpret it as a symbol of the
fulfillment of their love:

The bells would ring to call her
In valleys miles away:
"Come all to church, good people;
Good people, come and pray."
But here my love would stay.

And I would turn and answer
Among the springing thyme,
"Oh, Peal upon our wedding,
And we will hear the chime,
And come to church in time."
(II. 11–20)

Naturally enough, he wants the bells to peal on the occasion of
their wedding. But in the course of the poem, the sweetheart dies
and a single church bell tolls her burial while there is no groom
around. The early hope of youth is extinguished by death, and
there is a transition from summer to winter.

But when the snows at Christmas
On Bredon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone.

They tolled the one bell only,
Groom there was none to see,
The mourners followed after,
And so to church went she,
And would not wait for me.
(II. 21–30)

Housman himself was not satisfied with the concluding stanza.
He made many attempts to get it correct. But he could not make
it precisely right. The poem discusses two deaths, but there is

only one line- "The mourners followed after". Cleanth Brooks, resenting the line, says: "not because it is not true – presumably there were mourners – but because it is unnecessary – we do not need to be told in so many words that the girl died. Moreover, the direct reference to her death works against the indirect presentation of it through the poem's basic metaphor – which treats the funeral as if it were a marriage, in which the lover is betrayed by his sweetheart who jilts him and steals away to church to be wed to another."⁷

But in stanza 6 the bells have become funeral bells. The bells whose sound was once a happy noise to hear, and a symbol of promise, have become a needless noise, a call to death – a call which the youth now realizes he too must answer:

The bells they sound on Bredon,
And still the steeples hum,
"Come all to church, good people,"
Oh, noisy bells, be dumb;
I hear you, I will come.
(ll. 31–35)

The third line of the above stanza, which is repeated in stanza 3 of the poem, is an invitation to prayer extended to "good people" by ringing the church bells. Their sound seems to have lost its association with piety in the poet's mind in as much as one of these bells will ultimately toll his death as it did his sweetheart's. It seems clear that the speaker intends to obey the summons of

the bells in the same way that his lover did. On another level, says Keith Jebb, "it says something about the atheist Housman's attitude to organized religion: that no matter how much you avoid it in life, it always gets you in the end."⁸

"The True Lover" (ASL LIII) is again based on the inconstancy of love. The poem is concerned with the suicide of a young lover. A man visits the woman he loves. With an apparent simplicity, the poem deals with a lover who wishes to see his sweetheart (who has probably rejected him) once more before he departs for some unknown destination:

The lad came to the door at night,
When lovers crown their vows,
And whistled soft and out of sight
In shadow of the boughs.

"I shall not vex you with my face
Henceforth, my love, for aye:
So take me in your arms a space
Before the east is grey

"When I from hence away am past
I shall not find a bride,
And you shall be the first and last
I ever lay beside."

(II. 1–12)

The poem has caused problems for commentators because of its cryptic style. Critics like Brooks, Purser, and Warren point out the "symbolic force' of the poem and its ability to project "something beyond itself."⁹ Maude M. Hawkins also says that the suicide "may be entirely symbolic."¹⁰ The strength of the

poem lies in its effective use of the ballad form. Everything is concealed except the most significant details. The true nature of the situation is not clearly mentioned but is revealed step by step. That is why, it is not until the last line of the poem that one is able to understand the ambiguous title and the phrase that is repeated in the poem: 'When the lovers crown their vows.'

It is in stanza 5 that the readers discover the true nature of the lad's journey through the sweetheart's questions:

"Oh do you breathe, lad, that your breast
Seems not to rise and fall,
And here upon my bosom prest
There beats no heart at all?

.....

"Oh lad, what is it, lad, that drips
Wet from your neck on mine?
What is it falling on my lips,
My lad, that tastes of brine?"

(II. 17–20, 25–28)

The lad's answers make it clear that his is a journey of death because his heart has stopped and "never goes again" and his throat has been cut. One may wonder at Housman's purpose in depicting such an unrealistic situation, although the death of the young lover is crucial to the theme of the poem. The true lover is one whose love never ceases, but the inconstancy of love brings with it the suggestion that the lover must eventually break his vow. Therefore, the lover in this poem "remains true by adopting the desperately logical expedient of suicide at the

consummating moment of love.”¹¹ The real theme of the poem is that human nature is not capable of any lasting passion. Housman himself had realized the limit to which love is “speechless”, the key word in the poem:

Under the stars the air was light
But dark below the boughs,
The still air of the speechless night,
When lovers crown their vows.
(II. 33–36)

Probably the poem fails to use the melodrama to set up a deeper, more ironical and emotional atmosphere. But when the ghost comes out with the sarcastic remark about the knife slitting the throat across from “ear to ear” we are made aware of the ridiculousness of the situation. The dialogue follows its own course, with the girl wondering why her lips and neck are wet:

“Oh like enough ’tis blood, my dear,
For when the knife has slit
The throat across from ear to ear
’Twill bleed because of it.”
(II. 29–32)

So the line which is repeated in the poem, “when lovers crown their vows,” assumes new meaning through Housman’s redefinition. When it appears as the last line of the poem, it refers to the act of suicide as the true crowning of the vows of love. In the opening stanza it may suggest the lovers’ promise to consummate the act of love. So “the true lover” of the poem’s title is now a dead lover.

All of Housman's love lyrics are not as serious in tone as the preceding analyses might suggest. Yet all of them have the same emphasis on inconstancy. In *ASL V*, the young lover, who is walking among the flowers with his girl, emphasizes the illusiveness of time as he tries to seduce her. The dominant sense of time is further suggested by the flower imagery. In the first stanza the dandelions "tell the hours/that never are told again" (II. 3—4). In stanza 2 the youth links the flower image to his argument: "What flowers to-day may flower to-morrow, /but never as good as new." (II. 13—14). Finally, in stanza 4 he sighs. "Ah, life, what is it but a flower?" (1. 29). The poem is set in springtime, with its promise of fulfillment:

Ah, spring was sent for lass and lad,
 'Tis now the blood runs gold,
 And man and maid had best be glad
 Before the world is old.
 (II. 9—12)

Yet this promise of youth is shattered with the discovery that all things, even human affection, are transient. In the last two lines of each stanza of the poem, the flatteries of the youth become increasingly more urgent and the replies of the young girl increasingly more skeptical. Stanza 1 ends with "— 'Twill do no harm to take my arm. / 'You may, young man, you may' "; stanza 2 "— Suppose I wound my arm right round—/ ' 'Tis true, young man, 'tis true' "; stanza 3, "My love is true and all for you.

/ 'Perhaps, young man, perhaps' "; and stanza 4 culminates in, "Be kind, have pity, my own, my pretty. —/ 'Good-bye, young man, good-bye' ".

ASL VI deals with unrequited love which causes different kinds of "ills" to human beings. It is only after one's death that the ills of unrequited love are over but someone else is victimized by it. According to Housman, this cycle of victimization goes on eternally in human life. It treats love as an illness with the lover "Mute and dull of cheer and pale", lying "at death's own door". The maiden can "heal his ail," but at the risk of infecting herself. It again emphasizes the transitory nature of love because if the lover's desires are fulfilled, his love is over, and the maiden must "lie down forlorn":

Buy them, buy them eve and morn
Lovers' ills are all to sell.
Then you can lie down forlorn;
But the lover will be well.
(II. 9–12)

The imagery of buying and selling recurs here with the same implication of *ASL XIII* – love can never be given freely but is always sold. The maiden must get something in return, in this case, the "wan look, the hollow tone, / The hung head, the sunken eye" (II. 6–7). It is now she who is ill, for in transferring the ills of love, her lover has recovered. He is a ruthless lover

who wants from the girl what will transfer to her the pains of love and leave him free of pain.

ASL XI is a short poem “that brings together the themes of unsatisfied love, departure, and death in a distant spot.”¹² The young man asks his lover to take pity on him before he leaves for a distant land where death awaits him. However, we are not sure whether the envisaged journey is real or metaphorical: “the Shakespearean ‘darnel’ suggests as English rather than a foreign grave.”¹³ It is nothing but a plea for the requiting of love before separation:

Night should ease a lover’s sorrow;
Therefore, since I go to-morrow,
Pity me before.

In the land to which I travel,
The far dwelling, let me say—
Once, if here the couch gravel,
In a kinder bed I lay,
And the breast and darnel smothers
(II. 5–12)

The last stanza of *ASL XII* depicts two lovers in death:

Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside,
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.
(II. 13–16)

It is only in death that lovers stay together, when they cannot know it. Their state can never be altered by time. Death is thus regarded as superior to life, “the house of flesh” characterized by

“the heats of hate and lust”. Death has caught the lovers at the highest point of their love and made the time stand still.

The lover of *ASL XVIII* is almost flippant in his attitude towards the inconstancy of love. The poem is light in tone and avoids the Housman’s usual association of love with death or suicide. The lover is quite himself again because of his discovery of the transience of all human emotions. The poem very clearly states Housman’s theme that “nothing will remain”:

Oh, when I was in love with you,
Then I was clean and brave,
And miles around the wonder grew
How well did I behave.

And now the fancy passes by,
And nothing will remain,
And miles around they’ll say that I
Am quite myself again.

There is some evidence that Housman arranged the contents of *A Shropshire Lad* to form a series: T. B. Haber notes that at the top of XIII in the printer’s copy of his manuscript he wrote “Another Series”.¹⁴ *ASL XIII* serves as the introduction to a whole group of poems which depict the transiency of love. The five poems that follow deal in a more detailed manner with the various stages of the misery of the lad who fails to heed the wise man’s advice and gives his heart away. In *ASL XIV* the lover’s despair is so deep-rooted that probably it can never be removed:

There flowers no balm to sain him
From east of earth to west

That's lost for everlasting
The heart out of his breast.

Here by the labouring highway
With empty hands I stroll:
Sea-deep, till doomsday morning,
Lie lost my heart and soul.

(II. 13–20)

Some of the poems of Housman seem to have been occasioned either by his separation from his closest friend, Moses Jackson, who left for India in 1887 to take over as Principal of the Sind College, Karachi, or by some other emotional experience which Housman wanted to hide from his readers. They are naturally characterized by a strong element of ambiguity. This emotional element of Housman's poetry reminds us of what Tennyson said in *In Memoriam* v. 5–6: 'for the unquiet heart and brain, / A use in measured language lies'. In the same context (v. 1–4) Tennyson, measuring his language, confessed:

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

It was his poetry that offered Housman the medium to 'half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within". Housman wrote from an urgent personal need to find expression for the inexpressible. They are not for the most part 'biographical' in any straightforward sense. But they have a personal element that

cannot be ignored. Housman's unrequited love for Moses Jackson lay at the heart of his emotional life and about which it was impossible to silent remain silent. In fact Housman's poems have an instinct both for revelation and for concealment. "There is a Housman uncertainty principle: it sets up a set of circumstances that strongly suggest a certain conclusion, but denies you anything like proof."¹⁵ The following epigram is a very clear example of this aspect of his verse:

He would not stay for me; and who can wonder?
He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.
I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder
And went with half my life about my ways.

(AP VII)

These lines undoubtedly refer to Housman's strong and single love for Moses Jackson. They have pathos of their own, which it seems inseparable from what we know of Housman's actual life, no matter how much we may like to read it otherwise. Experience in the above lines has been presented in literal terms "Without the intervention of a symbol-making or mythologizing process".¹⁶ However, the absence of the element of specificity impedes its true appreciation. We recall that Housman's vestigial diary also used the pronoun 'he' without an explicit referent. Yvor Winters points out a similar kind of lacuna in Hopkins' *No Worst there is none*.¹⁷ There is no explicit reference even in the

posthumous poems which are relatively outspoken: 'Because I liked you better/ Than suits a man to say', and the protest poem about the trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde ('Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?'). And in so many other posthumous poems, the exact nature of 'unlucky love' (*MP XII.5*), the reason why the speaker can only spend the night alone striking his fist upon the stone (*MP XIX. 11-12*), or the identity of the person to whom it is said 'Shake hands, we shall never be friendsI only vex you the more I try' (*MP XXX. 1-2*), are all undisclosed. But the tone of a poem can at once disclose and conceal:

Ask me no more, for fear I should reply;
Others have held their tongues, and so can I;
Hundreds have died, and told no tale before:
Ask me no more, for fear I should reply –

How one was true and one was clean of stain
And one was braver than the heavens are high,
And one was fond of me: and all are slain.
Ask me no more, for fear I should reply.

(*AP VI*)

The poem's implicitness prompts questions – ask what? Reply what? Held their tongues about what? Told no late about what? The poem is as much about not saying what cannot be said as it is about saying what can be said. The second verse does give something of a reply, but the reply remains a veiled one.

At the time of Jackson's wedding Housman had composed, or had begun to compose, an "Epithalamium", which was

completed in 1922 and published that year in *Last poems*. In his biography of the poet, Norman Page suggested that Housman consented to collect and publish *Last Poems* as an offering to his friend, whom he knew by then, to be seriously ill. This seems quite possible. It is also reported that Housman told his friend at the time, 'you are largely responsible for my writing poetry'.¹⁸

In his memoir, Laurence Housman opined that 'Ask me no more' had been set aside by Housman 'because he had used a refrain made familiar in one of Tennyson's lyrics'. Laurence Housman was no doubt right in thinking that his brother had no wish to see the poem in print. 'Ask me no more' echoes not only Thomas Carew's idealistic tribute to a lover,¹⁹ but a passage in Tennyson that links death with the overwhelming power of love:²⁰

Ask me no more: the moon may draw the sea:
The cloud may stoop from heaven and tale the shape
With fold to fold, of mountain or of cape;
But o too fond, when have I answered thee?
Ask me no more.

Ask me no more; what answer should I give?
I love not hollow cheek or faded eye;
Yet, O my friend, I will not have thee die!
Ask me no more, lest I should bid thee live;
Ask me no more.

Ask me no more; thy fate and mine are sealed:
I strove against the stream and all in vain:
Let the great river take me to the main:
No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield;
Ask me no more.

Housman must have felt and enjoyed in his own way the inner drama of love and reluctance Tennyson had put into it. 'Thy fate and mine are sealed' – that was certainly what he felt about himself and Moses Jackson. There must have been an added poignancy in the speaker of the poem growing more tender with each refusal she gives, 'No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield'. It is not difficult to think how much that would have effected the poet who took up the Tennysonian refrain which haunted him, and to whom the words 'fond' and 'friend' meant so much.²¹

Jackson might well have said, 'But o too fond, when have I answered thee?', if young man of the 1980's had been in the habit of saying such things in affectionate friendship. His friendliness to Housman seems to have been of the kind that would not have him die. On the contrary, it did its best to maintain a close relation while they lived the same house and worked at the same office. Jackson eventually left London for India, but he never broke off the friendship, Housman's love none the less had to remain unspoken and poetry had to remain its from of speech.²²

The first great love poem of *A Shropshire Lad* "Bredon Hill" was written in 1885. It was set in South Worcestershire but later

included with the Shropshire poems because it has the nostalgic and lovelorn themes of the others. It is filled with the irony of chances missed and happiness that has fled away – like this little poem from *ASL*.

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.

By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In field where roses fade.

(*ASL*. LIV)

It is not difficult to speculate about this incident. The circumstances seem to hint that Alfred had come to the point of making some kind of a declaration of love to Moses. The latter had told him that this was not reciprocated and could not go on. We can only guess at the truth. Two years later Moses Jackson left London for India. It was the parting of the ways:

Oh, when I was in love with you,
Then I was clean and brave,
And miles around the wonder grew
How well I did behave.

And now the fancy passes by,
And nothing will remain,
And miles around they'll say that I
Am quite myself again.

(*ASL* XVIII)

ASL XVII suggests the end of a transient affair. But perhaps XII from *More Poems* came closer to the truth:

I promise nothing: friends will part;
All things may end, for all began;
And truth and singleness of heart
Are mortal even as in man.

But this unlucky love should last
When answered passions thin to air;
Eternal fate so deep has cast
Its sure foundation of despair.
(MP XII)

This is closely related to:

If death and time are stronger,
A love may yet be strong;
The world will last for longer,
But this will last for long.
(AP, IX)

In 1889, Moses returned to England to get married, but he and his brother Adalbert resolved not to tell Housman about it. However, Alfred only learnt the news by letter after Moses and his new wife had returned to Karachi. But Housman continued to correspond with Moses until the latter's death thirty-four years later, in 1923, so he certainly forgave him.

The tragedy of unrequited love, a symbol perhaps of his own passionate friendship for Moses Jackson, haunts Housman. In many of his poems, the poet treats the theme of a heartless mistress who relents too late. Earlier group of Shropshire poems depict the varied faces of love: the misery of being unloved at the time of loving, the folly of loving that produces only misery, the lover's suicide, the exchange of innocence for experience, faithlessness, etc. A comparatively tragic view of love is depicted

in later Shropshire poems. For instance, the theme of *ASL XXI* ("Bredon Hill") is the impossibility of permanent love in a world where death is inevitable. The final series of love poems in the Shropshire group (Nos. XXV, XXVI, XXVII) deals with the true pathos of love, for all three poems reveal love's inconstancy by suggesting an endless cycle of lovers forgotten in death and betrayed by the surviving lovers.

Lyric XXXVII ("As Through the Wild Green Hills of Wyre") establishes the shift in setting from Shropshire to London. The theme of estrangement is established in the first four poems of the exile group, for these four poems, more than any other in *A Shropshire Lad* establish the contrast between the pastoral existence of Shropshire and the exile in London. The poems now look back westward from London to Shropshire, something living in the memory but beyond recovery.

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11. *Ibid.*, Item 23.
12. Norman Page. *AE. Housman: A Critical Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1983) p. 190.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
14. Tom Burns Haber, *The manuscript Poems of A.E. Housman* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1955) p. 123.
15. Keith Jebb, op. cit., p. 69.
16. Norman Page, op. cit., p. 184.
17. Yvor Winters, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins' in *Hopkins: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman, 1980 (Indian Reprint), p .41.
18. John Bayley, op. cit., p. 23.
19. 'Ask me no more where love bestowes': *The Poems of Thomas Carew*, ed. Rhodes and Dunlap (Oxford: OUP, 1949, corrected reprint, 1970) pp. 102-3. Noted in Norman Marlow, *A.E. Housman: Scholar and Poet* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958) p. 123. The poem is marked in pencil on p. 297 of Housman's copy of *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900*, ed. A.T. Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon

Press, 1900), which is now at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania.

20. Stanzas 2 and 3 of 'Ask me no more', added to *The Princess* in 1850: *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Longman, 1969) p. 829. Laurence Housman notes the parallel: *A.E.H.* (1937) p. 121.
21. John Bayley, *op.cit.*, p.24.
22. *Ibid.*

Chapter- 5

Theme of Exile

‘Everyone is born a king, and most people die in exile...’

Oscar Wilde.

The title of *A Shropshire Lad* has aroused the misconception that the work is set entirely in Shropshire. There is hardly any truth in the belief of some of Housman’s early readers that he was a Shropshire poet. Housman himself corrects this fact in a letter to Maurice Pollet:

I was born in Worcestershire, not Shropshire, where I have never spent much time...I had a sentimental feeling for Shropshire because its hills were our western horizon. I know Ludlow and Wenlock, but my topographical details— Hughley, Abdon under Clee, —are sometimes quite wrong¹

Keith Jebb writes:

The first thing to say about Housman’s Shropshire is that it is not, and never was, the country on the Welsh border normally represented by that name. In fact it is as mythical as the Britain of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, or the pastoral setting of Sir Phillip Sidney’s *Acradia*. It is not that the poet did not know

Shropshire well, having never lived there, though he didn't; it is not even that he falsified the geography of the place to suit himself, though he did: it is more that in creating Shropshire he produced a stage, a little world on which to set in motion the characters, the emotions and the dramas that he needed to portray.²

An examination of the poems which preserves the integrity of their order reveals that only the first thirty-six are set in Shropshire, the remainder, principally in London.³ That all of Housman's poems do not depend upon the reality of the Shropshire setting has been demonstrated by the recent study of Ralph Franklin, who showed that only fifteen of the sixty-three poems contain references to Shropshire, a number of these recognized by the poet as inaccurate.⁴

ASL XXXVII establishes the shift in setting from Shropshire to London. It also determines with few exceptions the theme and tone of the remaining poems of *A Shropshire Lad*. The poems now look back westward from London to Shropshire. The mood of the speaker in the poems is now one of nostalgia for something lost and never to be recovered. The theme of estrangement is established in the first four poems of the exile group, three of which were shifted to their present position in the

final ordering, the fourth ("In My Own Shire, if I Was Sad") added to the printer's copy immediately before publication.⁵

ASL XXXVII was included as a functional poem to emphasize the gap that lies between the earlier group of Shropshire poems and the exile poems which follow. Norman Page calls it "a poem of departure in which the city is seen, as in Wordsworth's 'Michael', as a place of temptation."⁶ The poem describes the effect of the vanishing of the Shropshire landscape from the sight of Terence⁷ as the train carries him to London:

As through the wild green hills of Wyre
The train ran, changing sky and shire,
And far behind, a fading crest,
Low in the forsaken west
Sank the high-reared head of Clee,
My hand lay empty on my knee.
Aching on my knee it lay:
That morning half a shire away
So many an honest fellow's fist
Had well nigh wrung it from the wrist.

(ll. 1–10)

But the loneliness and anxiety of the London poems are also anticipated. In one passage, Terence addresses the hand which still aches from the handshakes at his departure:

Hand, said I, since now we part
From fields and men we know by heart,
From strangers' faces, strangers' lands,—
.....
You and I must keep from shame
In London streets the Shropshire name;
On banks of Thames they must not say
Severn breeds worse men than they;
And friends abroad must bear in mind

Friends at home they leave behind.
Oh, I shall be stiff and cold
When I forget you, hearts of gold;
The land where I shall mind you not
Is the land where all's forgot.

(ll.11–13, 17–26)

In *ASL XXXVIII*, the persona nostalgically looks back to the west, to Shropshire, the land of his birth, from which he has now become estranged. “It is indeed a different kind of poet; one who claims in his other fantasy that the wind from Shropshire is an emanation of his friends’ voices, warm with their breath and blood.”⁸:

The winds out of the west land blow,
My friends have breathed them there;
Warm with the blood of lads I know
Comes east the sighing air.

It fanned their temples, filled their lungs,
Scattered their forelocks free;
My friends made words of it with tongues
That talk no more to me.

Their voices, dying as they fly,
Thick on the wind are sown;
The names of men blow soundless by,
My fellows’ and my own.

(ll.1–12)

Metaphorically, the wind is the life force with which the pastoral youth identified himself in the home shire. This identification is suggested in line 2 (“My friends have breathed them [the winds] there”), and in line 3, which refers to the winds as “warm with the blood of lads I know.” In line 4 the wind is the breath of life which “filled their lungs.” Wind is one of Housman’s favourite

images. Norman Page writes, “its richness of meaning includes the literal winds of heaven, human passion, the spirit of life, connection with one’s origin (the wind blows from one place to another), and destruction (as in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”, the wind as ‘destroyer’ as well as ‘preserver’). The wind is also Housman’s pervasive geographical sense: for him, exile and separation are concepts indivisible from the idea of movement in this or that direction, usually and for good reason, on an east-west axis. Within a single poem, the wind may be evoked punningly; and the image links poems at different points in the collection. XXXII (‘From far, from eve and morning’), for instance, moves rapidly from the ‘twelve-winded sky’ to ‘the stuff of life’ blown by the wind, then to the ‘breath’ that, Beckett-like, Housman sees as man’s portion, finally back to the ‘wind’s twelve quarters’ that disperse the fleshy envelope after death. In XXXI (“On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble”), the wind blows not just through a human life but through history: an actual wind becomes ‘the old wind in the old anger’—the wind of the distant past; then the ‘gale of life’, blowing through ‘the tree of man’, that links dead Roman and Victorian Englishman.”⁹ The last two stanzas of *ASL* XXXVIII make it clear that there is an inseparable bond between the wind and Shropshire existence. “The ‘sighing air’ is first the west wind linking home with the

place of exile, then the breath of life and the spoken words of lost friends, and finally the exile's own sighing,"¹⁰

Oh lads, at home I heard you plain,
But here your speech is still,
And down the sighing wind in vain
You hollo from the hill.

The wind and I, we both were there,
But neither long abode;
Now through the friendless world we fare
And sigh upon the road.
(ll. 13–20)

The three poems which follow bears the same sense of loss and nostalgia because they look back to a land of youth and simplicity, like Wordsworth's pastoral figure, that "...there hath passed away a glory from the earth."¹¹ Lyrics XXXIX–XLI reminds us of the "Intimations Ode," the hour of "splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower"¹²:

'Tis time, I think, by Wenlock town
The golden broom should blow;
The hawthorn sprinkled up and down
Should charge the land with snow.

Spring will not wait the loiter's time
Who keeps so long away;
So others wear the broom and climb
The hedgerows heaped with may.

Oh tarnish late on Wenlock Edge,
Gold that I never see;
Lie long high snowdrifts in the hedge
That will not shower on me.
(No. XXXIX)

There is a great difference between Housman's treatment of the loss of harmony with nature in *A Shropshire Lad*. and Wordsworth's conception of the same process in a poem like "Intimations Ode." Housman depicts the loss not in terms of time but in the motif of two lands, one a land of youth and simplicity, the other a place of exile. Moreover, Wordsworth finds compensation, even in the midst of loss, in the memories of youth.¹³ ASL XXXIX "echoes II ('Loveliest of trees, the cherry now') but wears the exile's rue with a difference, for it is less man's morality than separation caused by circumstances that makes poignant the thought of springtime beauty; the "cherry hung with snow" is no longer seen but dreamed of."¹⁴

The persona of ASL XL dreams of the "land of lost content" and the "blue remembered hills" from a distance because now he is in London. The "land of lost content" is Shropshire and the memories of youth is "an air that kills":

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

However, R.L. Kowalczyk, obviously unaware of the change in setting, finds the reference to the “far country” confusing, although he believes that the confusion is deliberate:

The Shropshire commentator deliberately appears confused here, for Housman submerges the symbolic meaning of “far country.” Thus the reader fails to discern whether Terence wishes to describe his Shropshire or the irretrievable past. Terence’s confusion suggests that his memory is slowly debilitating and that he finds himself in the present observing a quickly changing world. In both cases, the speaker recognizes that time has robbed him of a sense of permanence and stability, since his fading memory destroys the unchanged past as quickly as his present world changes.¹⁵

But the speaker does not appear confused if the poem is seen in relation to the design of the whole work. Home shire is now indeed a “far country,” and it is being described not by an inhabitant who is confused or whose “memory is slowly debilitating”, but by an exile who views it only in the imagination. Moreover, the reader, who has observed the shift in setting does not fail to discern “whether Terence wishes to describe his Shropshire or the irretrievable past,” for they are

now one. Any confusion which arises from a reading of the poem must be related to the reader's failure to place the poem in its proper context.

ASL XLI "In MY Own Shire, if I Was Sad," is based on the contrast between the "homely comforters" of the home shire and the "mortal sickness" of London.¹⁶ John Stevenson has called the poem Housman's "Intimations ode,"¹⁷ dealing as it does with the Wordsworthian theme of the therapeutic value of nature. Yet as Stevenson further observes, Housman's attitude towards nature differs radically from Wordsworth's, primarily because Housman could not accept the Romantic doctrine of nature's divinity. The persona of "In My Own Shire" does not learn intimations of immortality from nature; it serves only as a comforter, sorrowing with the youth by displaying "the beautiful and death-struck year":

In my own shire, if I was sad,
Homely comforters I had:
The earth, because my heart was sore,
Sorrowed for the son she bore;
And standing hills, long to remain,
Shared their short-lived comrade's pain.
And bound for the same bourn as I,
On every road I wandered by,
Trode beside me, close and dear,
The beautiful and death-struck year.

(ll. 1-10)

“Yet this closeness to nature—albeit a sorrowing mortal nature—is absent in London. The persona has lost not only his oneness with the land but his empathy with man as well”¹⁸:

Yonder, lightening other loads,
The seasons range the country roads,
But here in London streets I ken
No such helpmates, only men;
And these are not in plight to bear.
If they would, another's care.
They have enough as 'tis: I see
In many an eye that measures me
The mortal sickness of a mind
Too unhappy to be kind.
Undone with misery, all they can
Is to hate their fellow man;
And till they drop they needs must still
Look at you and wish you ill.

(ll.19–32)

The picture of men of London, who “hate their fellow man,” reflects the hostile world where “homely comforters” are substituted by men who “wish you ill.”

The contrast between Shropshire and London is continued in two other poems of the exile group. *ASL* LII, “Far in a Western Brookland,” echoes the mood of lyrics XXXVIII– XLI both in its use of wind imagery and its comparison of two distinct states of existence:

Far in a western brookland
That bred me long ago
The poplars stand and tremble
By pools I used to know.

There, in the windless night time,
The wanderer, marveling why,
Halts on the bridge to hearken
How soft the poplars sigh.

He hears: no more remembered
In fields where I was known,
Here I lie down in London
And turn to rest alone.
(ll. 1-12)

The wind image of the last stanza suggests the unquiet soul of the lad who has forsaken the land of his youth for a barren existence in London:

There, by the starlit fences,
The wanderer halts and hears
My soul that lingers sighing
About the glimmering weirs.
(ll. 13-16)

ASL LV offers a complication to the exile motif. It suggests that the new existence has also its compensation. It allows the lad to escape one feature which characterized life in Shropshire:

Westward on the high-hilled plains
Where for me the world began,
Still, I think, in newer veins
Frets the changeless blood of man.
Now that other lads than I
Strip to bathe on Severn shore,
They, no help, for all they try,
Tread the mill I trod before.
(ll. 1-8)

The last two lines of the above stanza implies that no longer must the London lad "tread the mill [he] trod before." The process of change viewed in the poems of the Shropshire setting is repeated in the last two stanzas of this lyric because it again describes youth as a time of uncertainty and change:

There, when hueless is the west
And the darkness hushes wide,
Where the lad lies down to rest
Stands the troubled dream beside.

There, on the thoughts that once were mine,
Day looks down the eastern steep,
And the youth at morning shine
Makes the vow he will not keep.

(ll. 9–16)

According to Leggett, if Shropshire and London are taken as symbolic of two diverse states of existence, it is necessary to recognize that Housman continues in these symbols the central paradox of loss and gain found in the individual poems of *A Shropshire Lad*. The quest for permanence in a mutable world can be achieved only through the sacrifice of the essence of existence itself. But, conversely, the loss of the simplicity and vitality of the pastoral world is partially offset by the more stable vision of maturity.¹⁹

“The Merry Guide,” (ASL XLII) is an allegorical narrative in which the speaker of the poem is approached by “a youth that trod/With feathered cap on forehead/ And poised a golden rod”. Here the persona recollects the departure from Shropshire as a mythic journey of death. This Merry Guide leads him across the countryside, refusing to say where they are going, refusing in fact, to say anything:

With mien to match the morning
And gay delightful guise
And friendly brows and laughter
He looked me in the eyes.

Oh whence, I asked, and whither?
He smiled and would not say,
And looked at me and beckoned
And laughed and lead the way.

And with kind looks and laughter
And not to say beside
We two went on together,
I and my happy guide.

(ll. 9–20)

According to Louise Boas, the merry guide of poem's title is the god Hermes, identified by his feathered cap (stanza 2) and his "serpent-circled wand" (stanza 15).²⁰ Here Hermes is performing his role of leading dead to the underworld. His birthplace was Acradia. He is the pastoral god, the god of roads, and the protector of travellers.²¹ All these functions are consistent with images Housman uses in dealing with the departure from Shropshire.

The wind imagery dominates the poem. The narrator recalls the journey which began

Once in the wind of morning
I ranged the thymy wold;
The world-wide air was azure
And all the brooks ran gold.

(ll. 1–4)

The journey itself is described as the passing of the wind:

Across the glittering pastures
And empty upland still
And solitude of shepherds
High in the folded hill,

By hanging woods and hamlets
That gaze through orchards down

On many a windmill turning
And far discovered town,

With gay regards of promise
And sure unslackened stride
And smiles and nothing spoken
Led on my merry guide.
(ll.21-32)

Like Shelley's west wind, the wind through which the narrator and his guide travel is both "destroyer and preserver,"²² carrying the blossoms of spring and the dead leaves of autumn. Thus the wind of spring symbolizes the destruction of life and the wind of autumn its preservation. It is, in fact, the paradoxical nature of the journey which complicates what is, on the surface, a simple narrative. "But the happy guide is also the conductor of the dead, whom the poem sees as giving the soul on its last journey all the affection it could not receive in life. And with that all the speechless fellow-feeling of the dead"²³:

And like the cloudy shadows
Across the country blown
We two face on for ever,
But not we two alone.

With the great gale we journey
That breathes from gardens thinned,
Borne in the drift of blossoms
Whose petals throng the wind;

Buoyed on the heaven-heard whisper
Of dancing leaflets whirled
From all the woods that autumn
Bereaves in all the world.
(ll. 41-52)

The persona perceives the true nature of the journey in stanza 14, still he follows willingly his delightful guide:

And midst the fluttering legion
Of all that ever died
I follow, and before us
Goes the delightful guide,
(ll. 53–56)

The irony of the poem lies in the fact that the “delightful guide” leads the speaker to the land of the dead. In fact, the title and the description of Hermes throughout the poem contribute to the ironical tone. “The guide is described in stanza 5 as “my happy guide,” and in stanza 8, as a “merry guide.” In addition, he is characterized in stanza 3 by a “gay delightful guise” and “friendly brows and laughter,” and in stanza 5 by “kind looks and laughter,” in stanza 8 and 15 by “ gay regards of promise” and “lips that brim with laughter”²⁴ the persona’s depiction of the guide has prompted Louise Boas to call the poem a highly ironic one:

Man might expect this merry guide to lead him to life and love– to Acradia. But like trickster he is, he leads man on through the fields and flocks, through the woods and orchards, through sunlight and clouds, to the world of the dead. He makes gay promises– unspoken but implied. A happy journey? So it seems on the surface. But is not the happiness a dream? Hermes

is the dream guide. If one follows him then one is in a dream. Man travels then through the dream of life to the reality of death. It is the guide who laughs.²⁵

The title of the poem is somewhat ambiguous and capable of both literal and ironic interpretation. "To an Athlete dying Young" clearly establishes the fact that, at times, death is an occasion of joy rather than of sorrow. The poem, then, may not be as "highly ironic" as Miss Boas has suggested. The poem, as John Bayley points out, "puts a sad a theme in a happy way, showing how the death guide, in whom we see all we can never have, accompanies us through life. Fulfillment in love comes only in imagination of it."²⁶

The implication of "The Merry Guide" is that the departure leads to a kind of spiritual death.²⁷ London is, in the symbolic sense, the *hades* to which Terence is led by the god of the dead. This state of spiritual death relieves the lad of some pain of the more vital existence of Shropshire. "The Merry Guide" in the London sequence deals with the preserving aspect of death. "The Immortal Part" pictures man's permanence as beginning after the death of the body and the soul:

"When shall this slough of sense be cast,
This dust thought be laid at last,

This man of flesh and soul be slain
And the man of bone remain?"
(ll.5-8)

ASL XLIV views death as the preserver of man's good name:

Shot? So quick, so clean an ending?
Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:
Yours was not an ill for mending,
'Twas best to take it to the grave.
(ll. 1-4)

The poem is based on the paradox that to destroy is in one sense to preserve. This theme is more briefly stated in *ASL XLV*, where Housman alludes to a Biblical passage to support an unorthodox doctrine:

If it chance your eye offend you,
Pluck it out, lad, and be sound:
'Twill hurt, but here are salves to friend you,
And many a balsam grows on ground.

And if your hand or foot offend you,
Cut it off, lad, and be whole;
But play the man, stand up and end you,
When your sickness is your soul.

The first two lines of stanza 1 recall Christ's words in Matthew 5:29 "And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from thee....". and lines 5 and 6 continue the allusion to verse 30: And if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not thy whole body go into hell."

We find a complicated view of the Acradia-exile pattern in *XLII-XLV* group of lyrics. The persona may look back eagerly on the

lost youth for which Shropshire now stands, but he finds compensation in the symbolic death-state of the London exile, for he escaped the pain of the youth's first discovery of his own transience. This new mood of thought is continued in later poems of the exile group, which deal with the lad's new found stability in the stoical attitude to life.²⁸

In *ASL LI*, the lad sees a Grecian statue in a London gallery. He is "brooding on [his] heavy ill," but the statue is "still in marble stone" and steadfastly looking at him. He imagines that the statue speaks to him, for he sees that they share a common fate:

Loitering with a vacant eye
Along the Grecian gallery,
And brooding on my heavy ill,
I met a statue standing still.
Still in marble stone stood he,
And steadfastly he looked at me.
"Well met," I thought that the look would say,
We neither knew, when we were young,
These Londoners we live among."

.....
"What, lad, drooping with your lot?
I too would be where I am not.

(ll. 1-10, 13-14)

The statue advises the lad to become a stoic— one who is indifferent to pleasure and pain. The trouble of life becomes light and bearable to the lad who achieves a degree of permanence in the face of life's transience by adopting the guise of death. He becomes "Manful like the man of stone":

Courage, lad, 'tis not for long:
Stand, quit you like stone, be strong.
So I thought his look would say;
And light on me my trouble lay,
And I stept out in flesh and bone
Manful like the man of stone.

(ll. 21–26)

Housman's advocacy of stoicism is inconsistent because it contradicts the attitude expressed in other poems.²⁹ Critics have never been careful enough to note the growth and development of the Shropshire lad. An examination of the position of these poems reveals that many of these poems deal with the pleasures of life at its prime and the pain of its dissolution; others show an unconcern for both its pleasures and its pains.

The first stanza of *ASL XLVIII* suggests the futility of struggling against "earth and high heaven":

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle,
Earth and high heaven are fixt of old and founded strong.
Think rather, –call to thought, if now you grieve a little,
The days when we had rest, O soul, for they were long.

(ll.1–4)

Gordon Pitts points out that the poet is echoing and reversing the words of a popular nineteenth-century hymn which begins: "Be still, my soul: The lord is on thy side;/ Bear patiently the cross of grief and pain," and ends:

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone.³⁰

ASL XLVI describes how a man reconciles himself to the consequences of his human state. The poet imagines, for his 'timeless grave', no timeless memorial garland, no cypress, yew, rosemary, and no leafless boughs which survive the winter and are reborn in the spring:

Bring, in this timeless grave to throw,
No cypress, sombre on the snow;
Snap not from the bitter yew
His leaves that lives December through;
Break no rosemary, bright with rime
And sparkling to the cruel clime;
Nor plod the winter land to look
For willows in the icy brook
To cast them leafless round him: bring
No spray that ever buds in spring.

(ll.1-10)

"The juxtaposition of those plants which survive the winter and experience the rebirth of spring with the "timeless grave" of one who "never shall arise" only serves to increase the irony of man's mortal state. Reflecting a new sense of resignation, the poem states that man must be comforted by those objects of nature which are for a single season"³¹:

But if the Christmas field has kept
Awns the last gleaner overstept,
Or shriveled flax, whose flower is blue
A single season, never two;
Or if one haulm whose year is o'er
Shivers on the upland frore,
—Oh , bring from hill and stream and plain
Whatever will not flower again,
To give him comfort: he and those
Shall bide eternal bedfellows
Where low upon the couch he lies
Whence he never shall arise.

(ll.11-22)

ASL L is the poem of a man who looks back to the time
when he was a Knighton lad: ³²

In valleys f springs of rivers,
By Ony and Teme and Clun,
The country for easy livers,
The quietest under the sun,

We still had sorrows to lighten,
One could be always glad,
And lads knew trouble at Knighton
When I was a Knighton lad.
(ll. 1-8)

He realizes the deplorable fact that even in youth “one could not be always glad,” because one has “sorrows to lighten,” and if, in London, “sorrow is with one still.” But he finds satisfaction in the thought that if a man’s burdens increase with age, so does his ability to bear them:

’Tis sure small matter for wonder
If sorrow is with one still.
.....
And if as a lad grows older
The troubles he bears are more,
He carries griefs on a shoulder
That handselled them long before.
(ll. 11-16)

The imagery of the poem makes it clear that the pain of human existence is a heavy weight, the luggage which encumbers the journey. The poem then looks to place where this burden may be removed, and the destination is envisaged in the last stanza:

Where shall one halt to deliver
This luggage I’d lief set down”

Not Thames, not Teme the river,
Nor London nor Knighton the town:

Tis a long way further han Knighton,
A quieter place than than Clun,
Where doomsday may thunder and lighten
And little `twill matter to one.
(ll.17-24)

“The concluding poems of *A Shropshire Lad* thus depict, on the whole, the mood of one who is resigned to the fact of death and has lost the frustration of youth who first becomes aware that he must die. Anguish is replaced by nostalgia for lost youth and, especially towards the end of the work, for friends the persona has outlived. “With Rue My Heart is laden,” is perhaps the finest expression of this mood.”³³ Lyric LVIII mourns “two honest lads” who accompanied the lad when he “came last to Ludlow,” and “The Isle of Portland,” ASL LIX, mourns the loss of a friend:

On yonder island, not to rise,
Never to stir forth free,
Far from his folk a dead lad lies
That once was friend with me.
(ll.5-8)

In LXI (“Hughley Steeple”), “The reunion with lost friends is found only in the grave, but it is also the final exile.”³⁴ This is the last poem of the exile group, and is concerned wholly with the death of friends whom the lad has survived:

The vane on Hughley steeple
Veers bright, a far-known sign,
And there lie Hughley people,

And there lie friends of mine.
Tall in their midst the tower
Divides the shade and sun,
And the clock strikes the hour
And tells the time to none.

(ll. 1-8)

Hughley Steeple, which divides the shade and sun, the north and the south, also plays a very important role in controlling the poem's imagery. These two directions have special significance because shaded northern side contains the suicides:

To south the headstones cluster,
The sunny mounds lie thick:
The dead are more in muster
At Hughley than the quick.
North, for a soon-told number,
Chill graves the sexton delves,
And steeple-shadowed slumber
The slayers of themselves.

(ll. 9-16)

The narrator, resigned to death, makes no distinction between the groups. Death is now a matter of indifference:

To north, to south, lie parted,
With Hughley tower above,
The kind, the single-hearted,
The lads I used to love.
And, south or north, `tis only
A choice of friends one knows,
And I shall ne'er be lonely
Asleep with these or those.

(ll.17-24)

On the surface, "Hughley Steeple" may appear to violate the Shropshire-exile structure. However, there is no clue in the poem to suggest that the speaker is now in Shropshire viewing the scene he is describing. Moreover, the speaker refers to the scene as *there*, not *here*: " And there lie in Hughley people,/ and there

lie friends of mine" (ll.3–4) Ultimately, it deserves mention here that in other poems of the London group, the narrator describes scenes in Shropshire as if he were actually present, though certainly he was not. Lyric LII pictures a scene in "a western brookland". The conclusion of the poem, however, makes it clear that the scene is viewed only in the imagination, for the narrator says of himself: "Here I lie down in London / And turn to rest alone."³⁵

The prevailing mood of *Last Poems* is the same as that of the second half of *A Shropshire Lad*, where the persona muses on his Shropshire youth from a new viewpoint and sees both the loss and gain involved in the process of change. "The First of May" (*Last Poems* XXXIV) exhibits one characteristic pattern of the exile poem.. In its four stanzas, Housman develops two viewpoints. In the first two stanzas, the persona is reminded of something of the sense of being a part of the world at its prime:

The orchards half the way
From home to Ludlow fair
Flowered on the first of May
In Mays when I was there:
And seen from stile or turning
The plume of smoke would show
Where fires were burning
That went out long ago.

The plum broke forth in green,
The pear stood high and snowed,
My friends and I between
Would take the Ludlow road ;
Dressed to the nines and drinking

And light in heart and limb ,
And each chap thinking
The fair was held for him.

(ll. 1-16)

The imagery of the stanzas indicates that the spring as well as the fair was held for the young man. It reflects the sense of harmony with the natural world. However, this sense of harmony is not there in the following stanzas and we see the gulf between the persona and his lost youth. This distance is made real by the projection of the other young men who are now "the fools that we were then":³⁶

Between the trees in flower
New friends at fairtime tread
The way where Ludlow tower
Stands planted on the dead.
Our thoughts, a long while after,
They think, our words they say;
Theirs now's the laughter,
The fair, the first of May.

Ay, yonder lads are yet
The fools that we were then;
For oh, the sons we get
Are still the sons of men.
The sumless tale of sorrow
Is all unrolled in vain:

May comes to-morrow
And Ludlow fair again.

(ll.17-32)

Here the youth is exiled from the natural world and the sense of being a part of the world at its prime has been lost. The youth now realizes that it was all an illusion; neither the spring nor the fair existed for him. The world of difference that lies between

past and present is very clearly stated here. It was nothing more than a part in an endless pageant of foolish young men acting out their own brief roles. But the persona betrays himself finally because he cannot destroy completely the beauty of the former vision. He realizes that the illusion is stronger than the knowledge that it was an illusion: "The sumless tale of sorrow / Is all unrolled in vain."³⁷

A number of the finest lyrics of *Last Poems* begin with the persona brooding over his boyhood when he had "youth and pride." In such a situation, the point of view is ironical because the persona looks back on his former self from the vantage point which time provides. *Last poems* XXXIX provides an instance of this:

When summer's end is nighing
And skies at evening cloud,
I muse on change and fortune
And all the feats I vowed
When I was young and proud.

The weathercock at sunset
Would lose the slanted ray,
And I would climb the beacon
That looked to Wales away
And saw the last of day.

From hill and cloud and heaven
The hues of evening died;
Night welled through lane and hollow
And hushed the countryside,
But I had youth and pride.

(ll.1-15)

“The imagery of dying summer and dying day unites past and present, and structurally the poem is built on the two contrasting responses to an image that signals the death of something desirable. For the older man the image evokes the past, but ironically the vision that he conjures up is that of himself as a young man observing the same sunset and contemplating the future”³⁸:

The year might age, and cloudy
The lessening day night close,
But air of other summers
Breathed from beyond the snows,
And I had hope of those.
(ll.21-25)

The images of change, summer’s end and sunset recur in each stanza of the poem. As the poem progresses, the aspirations of the young man are replaced by the mature man’s reluctant acceptance of what the scene he has gazed upon since boyhood really means. Typically, the poem does not end with an outcry against the injustice of it all, but with a simple sigh, the heart’s echo of the last sounds of summer³⁹:

So here’s an end of roaming
On eves when autumn nighs:
The ear too fondly listens
For summer’s parting sighs,
And then the heart replies.
(ll. 31-35)

In *Last Poems* XXXV, the search for the “lost young man,” still continues. But, as Bayley puts it, “the contemplation of

what is distant or disappeared, or a country of the mind, is less important for a romantic poet like Housman than the harsh actualities they contrast with.”⁴⁰

When first my way to fair I took
Few pence in purse had I,
And long I used to stand and look
At things I could not buy.

Now times are altered: if I care
To buy a thing I can;
The pence are here and here's the fair,
But where's the lost young man?
(ll.1-8)

The poems of this type all contain, at the bottom, the paradoxical notion that it was only the illusion that made life meaningful. The mature man, looking into the past, sees that life held a hope and significance for the young man which he no longer finds. The very act of looking into the past destroys the meaning by revealing the illusion. In “When first my way to fair I took,” suggests the same idea in a rather complicated way by the contrast between the young man with the few pence for whom the fair has a meaning and significance, and the mature man, who could now satisfy the desires of his youth, except that the act would now be meaningless. It was only the vanity and innocence which created the desires and the young man is gone. The real intention of the poet is, however, not to reveal the vanity

of youthful desires but to suggest the destructive effect of knowledge⁴¹:

—To think that two and two are four
And neither five nor three
The heart of man has long been sore
And long 'tis like to be.
(ll. 9–12)

The significance of the fair has departed with the “lost young man”, and the persona’s search for meaning takes him back to the past.

“Hell Gate” (*Last Poems XXXI*), is an allegorical narrative which deals with one aspect of Housman’s treatment of the past. It employs symbolic devices to treat the blending of idyllic past and hellish present. “Housman had his own hell, of course, but he did not believe that the wages of sin are death, as the narrator reflects while travelling towards hell’s gate with his ‘dark conductor’ ”⁴², a satanic version of the Merry Guide”

Many things I thought of then,
Battle, and the loves of men,
Cities entered, oceans crossed,
Knowledge gained and virtue lost,
Cureless folly done and said,
And the lovely way that led
To the slimepit and the mire
And the everlasting fire.
(ll. 25–32)

The narrator meets Sin and death on the drawbridge, at a moment when the sentry, one of the damned who guards the gates of hell, also reminds him of another time and place. In the

company of Death and Sin, “the sentry turned his head,/ looked, and knew me, and was Ned” (ll. 63–64). This sentry, seeing his old friend is also damned, revolts, and shoots the guide, who is of course Satan. This murder, an instinctive act of comradeship and love against all the odds, absolutely ruins the hell. In the end there are just the two of them:

And the hollowness of hell
Sounded as its master fell,
And the mourning echo rolled
Ruin through his kingdom old.
Tyranny and terror flown
Left a pair of friends alone,
And beneath the nether sky
All that stirred was he and I.
(ll.87–94)

Then, the two friends from the past, silently begin “the backward way,” and the fire about Ned extinguishes. The last lines, says Keith Jebb, “echo the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, except that in this backward glance nobody is turned to salt”⁴³:

And the ebbing luster died
From the soldier at my side,
As in all his spruce attire
Foiled the everlasting fire.
Midmost of the homeward track
Once we listened and looked back;
But the city, dusk and mute,
Slept, and there was no pursuit.
(ll. 97–104)

Clearly the poem deals with the longing for the redemption of the fallen world by the innocent world of the past. However, it is a theme which could not be treated realistically. Ned, the symbol of the pastoral world, releases the persona from the hold of

Death and Sin, the hell to which the fall from innocence has led him. So the narrator is ultimately able to recover the "lost young man," but only in a dream-vision.

Many of the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* deal with the pleasures of life at its prime and the pain of its dissolution; others show an unconcern for both its pleasures and its pains. The former mood pervades the Shropshire poems and the latter, those poems after the exile. Housman depicts in the latter poems of *A Shropshire Lad* an attitude towards life which has a direct relation to the young man's first discovery of his mortality. "The young man, cut off from a view of the physical world as permanent and benevolent, cannot accept the existence of a spiritual world which transcends the physical. The young man rebels against the injustice of it all; the mature man accepts the inevitable not as a happy solution but as the only possible one. The new attitude does not relieve the pain, but it renders it bearable. Perhaps the chief distinction of the concluding poems of *A Shropshire Lad* is the evidence of a mature mind imposing order on the flux of experience in a way that the adolescent mind could not."⁴² In brief, this group of exile poems of Housman allows us to share, at least temporarily, the sense of what it means to recognize the passing of youth, the movement from one

view of life to another, besides a nostalgic feeling for the place,
although imaginatively.

Notes and references:

1. Maurice Pollet, "Lettre inedited de A.H. Housman," *Etudes Anglaises*, V (1937) , 403.
2. Keith Jebb, *A.E.Housman* (Seren Books, 1992) ,p.73.
3. B.J.Leggett, Housman's *Land of Lost Content: A Critical Study of 'A Shropshire Lad'* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1970) p.93.
4. Ralph Franklin. "Housman's Shropshire," *MLQ*, XXIV (1963), 164–71.
5. Tom Burns Haber, "The Printer's Copy of *A Shropshire Lad*" in *The Manuscript Poems of A.E. Housman*, pp. 126–27.
6. Norman Page. *A.E.Housman: A Critical Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1983) p. 190.
7. Of course, in the convention of the work, Terence is the author of all the poems. Housman, it may be recalled, had originally intended to entitle the work *Poems by Ter ence Hearsay*, but was persuaded to change the title to *A Shropshire Lad* on the suggestion of his friend A.W .Pollard. See Richards p. 71.
8. John Bayley, *Housman's Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) p.116.
9. Norman Page, op. cit., p.195.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
11. "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," l. 17.
12. *Ibid.*, 180.
13. See John Stevenson, "Housman's Lyric Tradition," *Forum*, IV (1962) , 17-21, for a comparison of the attitudes towards nature in the poetry of Housman and Wordsworth which I have followed here.
14. Norman Page , op.cit., p.190
15. R.L. Kowalczyk, "Horatian Tradition and Pastoral Mode in Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*," *Victorian Poetry*, IV (1966), 232.
16. No.XLI is the last of the poems added to the printer's copy of *A Shropshire Lad*. See Haber, *Manuscript Poems*, p. 127.
17. Stevenson, op.cit., p. 20.
18. Leggett, op. cit. p.113.
19. *Ibid.*, p.115.
20. Louise Boas. "Housman's 'The Merry Guide,'" *Explicator*, III (1944-45), Item 6.
21. Miss Boas points out these functions of god in her analysis of the poem.
22. "Ode to the West Wind," l. 14.
23. John Bayley, op.cit., p. 113.

24. Leggett, op.cit., p.117.
25. Louise Boas. op.cit.Item 6.
26. John Bayley, op.cit., p.114.
27. Because one of the conventions of the pastoral is that an existence close to the soil, close to nature, is vital and intense, life apart from the pastoral setting –at court or in the city –involves a loss of vitality, a complication of the “simple life,” and also a corruption.
28. Leggett, op.cit. p.120.
29. See Jacob Bronowski, “Alfred Edward Housman” in *The Poet’s Defence*, p.221; and Hugh Molson, “The Philosophies of Hardy and Housman,” pp.207–208. The *stoicism* expressed in Housman’s poetry does not represent a philosophy in any strict sense, but an attitude or emotional state.
30. Gordon Pitts, “Housman’s ‘Be Still, My Soul,’ ” *Victorian Poetry*, III (1965) , 137–138.
31. Leggett, op.cit., p. 123.
32. Knighton is a town in southwestern Shropshire on the river Teme.
33. Leggett, op.cit., p. 125.
34. Norman Page, op.cit., p. 190.
35. Leggett, op. cit., p. 127.

36. B.J.Leggett, *The Poetic Art of A.E.Housman: Theory And Practice* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978)
p.73.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
38. *Ibid.*, p.78.
39. *Ibid.*, p.79.
40. Bayley, op.cit.,p. 55.
41. Leggett, op. cit. (N 36), p.79.
42. Bayley, op.cit.,p. 155.
43. Keith Jebb, op.cit., p.90.
44. Leggett, op.cit., (N3), p.124.

Chapter- 6

Treatment of Nature

London is a woeful place,
Shropshire is much pleasanter.
Then let us smile a little space
Upon fond nature's morbid grace.
Oh, Woe, woe, woe, etcetera...

Mr. Housman's Message by Ezra Pound.

During his childhood Housman often took his brothers and sisters for walks along the countryside with a didactic purpose, teaching them the names of flowers and more particularly of trees, which he always loved and could identify with characteristic accuracy and precision. Being a Foundation Scholar he could live at home as a day-boy, walking to school each morning across the fields. He was sixteen years old at this time. That he much preferred his home-life in the midst of nature and with his stepmother Lucy is shown by this sad little letter from his school in 1875:

Yesterday I went into the churchyard, from which one can see Fockbury quite plainly, especially the window of your room. I was there from two o'clock till three. I wonder if you went into your room between those hours. One can see quite plainly the pine tree, the sycamore and the elm at the top of the field. The house looks much nearer than you would expect, and the distance between the sycamore and the beeches in the orchard seems very great, much longer than one thinks when one is in Fockbury.¹

And this letter to Percy Withers in 1928 gives a rare hint at how observant Housman was of nature:

...there have been so many early springs in the last fifteen years people have forgotten the proper time for leaves and flowers to come out. For twenty years or so from 1887 onward I noted these things in a diary, on the strength of which I inform you that the lilac usually comes into blossom on 7 May...²

That Shropshire is a county of the mind, this is not really so in respect of topography, has already been explained in chapter 5. Housman mapped out his territory in a letter to Houston Martin:

I am Worcestershire by birth: Shropshire was our western horizon, which make me feel romantic about it. I do not know the county well, except in parts, and some of my topographical details are wrong and imaginary. The Wrekin is wooded, and Wenlock edge along the western side, but the Clees and most of the other hills are grass or heather. In the southern half of the county, to which I have confined myself, the hills are generally long ridges running from north to south, with valleys, broad or narrow, between.³

The English countryside is everywhere in Housman's poetry. Many of the poems— and not only those of *A Shropshire Lad*— are given a pastoral setting. *ASL* II ("Loveliest of Trees") may be called a nature poem in a way characteristic of Housman. The interest he shows in

nature in this poem is purely visual in character. He tries to strike a note of contrast between the beauty of spring which returns eternally in accordance with the cycle of seasons and his transient life. While reading it, one is reminded of Robert Herrick's *To Daffodils*. A major difference between the two poems lies in the fact that Housman perhaps does not deal with the idea of the transience of life as effectively as Herrick has done. Cleanth Brooks writes, "Time is the enemy of delight and yet the cherry tree is the product of time. The very description of the springtime beauty is ominous: if "hung with snow" is a way of stressing the unbelievable whiteness of the blossoms, the phrase also hints of winter and death to come."⁴ It is characteristic of Housman to conjure up images of nature in order to highlight the brevity of human life:

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

Housman's preoccupation with nature is very different from that of the early Romantics and we must take into account this changed attitude if we are to understand his poems. He did not propound any pantheistic philosophy, nor did he write a poem like Wordsworth's "*The Education of Nature*" or Keats "*Ode to Autumn*". "If nature is lovely and offers man delight, she does not offer him solace or sustain him as Wordsworth was solaced and sustained."⁵

"A certain love of Nature, a vital interest, which man's intelligence and feeling take in the outward world, a desire to

harmonize its doings with our own, to picture them as human, to give them an intelligence and passion like our own, appears to have been implanted in the human race from the earliest times.”⁶ However, the depiction of nature by Thomas Hardy or Robert Frost reveals the somewhat altered perspective of the twentieth century. Frost’s themes in the nature poems are the usual themes of the 20th century poets – fear, grimness, terror, horror, loneliness, isolation, paradoxes, etc. His attitude to nature is scientific in so far as he thinks that nature is indifferent to man and does not take notice of him. Nature was glorified like a benign mother by Wordsworth and other Romantic poets. To them nature appears to have a *holy plan* of her own for the good of mankind and she keeps a benevolent watch over man. But Robert Frost views nature as hostile to man and other living beings. The outward appearance of nature is highly deceptive.

Let us extend the term *poetry* to include some of the finest prose fiction and look at the picturing of nature in Hemingway and Faulkner. “The natural world is reflected with beautiful delicacy and even radiance in the fishing episode in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, or in the hunting scenes of Faulkner’s “The Bear.” This latter story concludes with what can be described as a great hymn to nature.”⁷

So our immensely increased knowledge of nature or even the so-called scientific neutralization of nature has not destroyed her charm in the eye of many of our poets. But it has altered their attitudes

towards her and at the same time it has emphasized man's sense of alienation from nature. "The poems of Robert Frost testify again and again to the elemental attraction of nature of which man is a part, but Frost never yields to the delusion that man can slip through the invisible barrier to merge himself into nature."⁸ The poems, *My November Guest* and *Reluctance* do portray the pleasure the poet experiences in communion with nature. But it is in accordance with his conviction that man should never make the mistake of crossing the "wall" and trespassing into the domain of nature. In *Tree At My Window*, the tree can experience only outer weather, storms, strong wind, etc. it does not and cannot know "Inner weather"— spiritual upheaval, the agony of the soul, the plague and the torment of the thinking and questioning mind. The poet's attitude to nature is almost contrary to that of romantic poetry. The Romantics emphasized the points of similarity between man and nature. Frost stresses the essential differences between both the worlds.

Again, the traveller in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* pauses as he enjoys the beauty of the lovely scene. He is tempted to prolong his stay there, allowing his mind to be hypnotized by the charming woods:

The woods are lovely dark and deep.

But he is a man of the world: he has promises to keep and it is significant that he drives on.

Frost's treatment of nature can help us to understand Housman's characteristic attitude towards nature in the beautiful poem XL ("Tell me not here, it needs not saying") in *Last Poems*. Of course, the poetic strategies of the two poets differ in a number of ways and I am not going to suggest that the attitudes of the two poets are identical. But the comparison can help us understand the "modern" attitude of Housman that we may easily overlook

LP XL is a celebration of nature's beauty and a farewell to that beauty. The theme of the poem is the resignation of the poet's mistress Nature to another. The poet possessed her too completely to feel that she is less than a part of himself. "It is not the poet's fault but nature's, the deceiving enchantress, whom the poet willingly resigns to some successor"⁹:

Tell me not here, it needs not saying,
What tune the enchantress plays
In aftermaths of soft September
Or under blanching mayes,
For she and I were long acquainted
And I knew all her ways.

The poet's knowledge of the ways of nature is thorough and complete. He expresses this in the second and third stanzas:

On russet floors, by waters idle,
The pine lets fall its cone;
The cuckoo shouts all day at nothing
The leafy dells alone;
And traveller's joy beguiles in autumn
Hearts that have lost their own.

On acres of the seeded grasses
The changing burnish heaves;
Or marshaled under moons of harvest
Stand still all night the sheaves;

Or beeches strip in storms for winter
And stain the wind with leaves.

“These beautiful stanzas do more than create a series of scenes from nature. They insinuate the speaker’s claim to his possession of nature through an intimate knowledge of her ways. Each of the vignettes suggests the secret life of nature revealed to a rapt and solitary observer: the tap of the falling pine cone, audible only because the scene is hushed and breathless; the shouts of the solitary cuckoo, who seems to be calling to no other bird and not even to a human listener but with cheerful idiocy shouting “at nothing”; the flower called “traveller’s joy” in the autumn sunshine silently extending to the joyless wayfarer its grace of self, the namesake of joy.”¹⁰

The “changing burnish” on the “acres of the seeded grasses,” probably mean the faint light that one sees upon a hayfield in late summer when the wind heaves and ripples the long grass stems to catch the light. “Burnish” is not too extravagant a term, for the grass sometimes shimmers as if they were metallic. The wind that heaves the grass is the wind of late summer. Late autumn gale strips the leaves of the beech trees. “The secret life of nature is thus depicted through all weathers and throughout the round of the seasons. All of it has been observed by the speaker, all of it has been made his own

possession through knowledge and is held now in memory. But the various scenes of the changing year are but the magic spells woven by the one enchantress.”¹¹

The fourth stanza emphasizes the speaker’s claim to possession. However, “the countries I resign” depicts the relinquishment of his claims:

Possess, as I possessed a season,
The countries I resign,
Where over the elmy plains the highway
Would mount the hills and shine,
And full of shade the pillared forest
Would murmur and be mine.

“His claim to possession is based upon a shared experience, a secret knowledge, the kind of bond that unites two lovers who feel that they belong to each other. But in this instance, the beloved is nature; and nature is not one to recognize any lover’s claim to possession.”¹¹

Nature, which is stupid as well as unfeeling, used to seduce him with her beauties. But now the poet realizes that she is faithless, no longer giving herself to him but to some stranger. The poet has loved nature whole-heartedly, but now his time for loving nature has come to an end, and now it is another’s turn. The poet’s disillusionment is probably based on the grim realization that nature’s charms are really fickle. She is the idiot mistress, having no more mind than heart.

For nature, heartless, witless nature,
Will neither care nor know
What stranger's feet may find the meadow
And trespass there and go,
Nor ask amid the dews of morning
If they are mine or no.

Nature, despite all her attractiveness to man, is highly indifferent to him. This is the most important point upon which the poem is based. The very charm of nature lies in the way in which she can give herself freely to all of us who will eagerly try to claim her. And moreover, if nature is heartless and witless, she is still as freshly beautiful as the morning. Nature spreads her dewy meadow as virginally fresh for the imprint of the feet of the trespasser as for those of the old lover who would like to believe that he alone possessed her.¹²

Wordsworth, who "could receive infinite teaching, healing' splendour of thought, imaginations calm and fair, freedom from melancholy, joy ,peace and love in his own heart from the world around him. Nothing in him interfered with Nature's action on him. She spoke to him, and he listened to her song" also realized that "there was vital difference between man and Nature, and this he laid down with great and careful clearness. Nature and man were two separate beings, distinguishable always the one from the other. The poet does not make this or that mood in Nature by imagination; it is Nature who communicates, like a

person, her mood to the poet. We must grasp, when we read Wordsworth, this conception of his, if we would read him rightly, this separate life of Nature and man which enables a reciprocal action to take place between them. We do not receive from Nature what we give to her, "her life the eddying of her living soul," as Coleridge thought; we give, and then receive back from her, something wholly different. It is not the reflection of ourselves which Nature gives us; it is the friendship of another life than ours. The birds do not sing gaily or sorrowfully because the poet happens to be sad or happy; they sing their own pain or pleasure"¹³:

The birds around me hopped and played;
Their thoughts I cannot measure.¹⁴

But he is certain that they have their own feeling:

For the least motion that they made,
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.¹⁵

The flowers had each its own enjoyment in the air, not his:

It is my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.¹⁶

Certainly the idea of the poem has been taken seriously by critics, including Empson, who praised it, but writes:

I think the poem is wonderfully beautiful. But a secret gimmick may well be needed in it to overcome our resistances, because the thought must be about the silliest or most self-centered that has been expressed

about Nature. Housman is offended with the scenery, when he pays a visit to his native place, because it does not remember the great man; this is very rude of it. But he has described it as a lover, so in a way the poem is only consistent to become jealous at the end. Perhaps the sentiment has more truth than one might think...many English painters really are in love with the scenery of England, and nothing else, so they had much better give up their theoretical tiff with Nature and get back to painting it.¹⁷

Ricks regards Empson , but maintains that “What we have is the co-existence of powerful love for Nature with powerful erotic feelings. It is in the last stanza that the bitterness makes itself heard; the poet is still in love with something he knows is heartless and witless (no substitute for the love of people). Lurking behind this attack on the faithless promiscuity of Nature is the traditional image for a promiscuous woman as “the wide world’s common place,” or “the bay where all men ride.” Bitterness, perversity, and self-reproach are all fused by lyrical grace into a poem unique in the language.”¹⁸

Housman is definitely modern in his attitude towards nature. The essential themes in the nature poetry of the 20th

century — fear, horror, loneliness, isolation, paradoxes— are all there in his poetry. Wordsworth used to assert that nature never did betray the heart that loved her. But Housman does not agree with it. According to him, nature is ever indifferent to man. Housman, like Frost, believed that the external calm and beauty of nature is highly deceptive. Nor is he, like Wordsworth, a poet who has had a vision in youth which he can spend the rest of his life interpreting. Housman's poems tell us of his daily, and one might say, common experience. His earlier poems manifest his lifelong interest in the contemplation of nature by means of careful observation. In these poems, contraries— light and darkness, good and evil—are constantly being set side by side. But, as Norman Marlow points out, "the sensitiveness to the beauty of the world which finds exquisite expression in his poetry was heightened by the thought of death."¹⁹ "His footprints become our own; we stand in his shoes; we share in his experience, which has been treasured up and given a life beyond life. That is what art can do. That is why we must always feel a deep gratitude to the poet."²⁰

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
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4. Cleanth Brooks, in *A.E.Housman: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Christopher Ricks (ed.), (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Eaglewood Cliffs. 1968), p.78.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Stopford A.Brooke, *Naturalism in English Poetry* (J.M.Dent & Sons, London & Toronto), p. 25.
7. Cleanth Brooks, op.cit., p.79.
8. *Ibid.*
9. John Bayley, *Housman's Poems* (Oxford:Clarendon,1992) p.170.
10. Cleanth Brooks, op.cit.,p.81.
11. *Ibid.* p.82.
12. Cleanth Brooks, op.cit., p. 83
13. Brooke, op.cit., pp. 161-62.
14. Quoted in Brooke, op.cit., p.161.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*

17. William Empson, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2 (1962), 40–41. See also Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry*, 177.
18. Ricks,(ed), op.cit.,(N4), p.122.
19. Norman Marlow, *A.E.Housman: Scholar and Poet* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p.2.
20. Cleanth Brooks, op.cit., p.84.

Chapter- 7

Conclusion

Housman's poetry has often been praised by his critics for its simplicity of form and meaning. Apparently it does not seem to offer any difficulty. But there is enough truth in what J.P. Bishop has remarked about this simplicity when he says that despite an apparent clarity such that almost any poem seems ready to deliver its meaning at once, there is always something that is not clear, something not brought into the open, something that is left in doubt. Like the classical philosophers, Epicurus and Lucritus, Housman believed that the human fear of death prevents any real and productive means of existence. An examination of his poetry reveals the manner in which he employs the tenets of atomic theory to demonstrate the vacuous nature of human life in an enduring face of death.

Housman in his poems such as "Loveliest of Trees", explicitly expresses his belief that an awareness of the brevity of life leads to a desire to experience it more intensely. His poem "Reveille" is a call for action and involvement in youth before death closes the

opportunity for action. In many of Housman's poems, however, the recognition of transience and decay leads to the desire for the release of death rather than a more meaningful participation in life. It is the second element of the theme that has led many critics to dismiss Housman as a bitter pessimist who exposes the tragic side of life. However, a careful analysis of the poems in which these two aspects of the theme appear casts some doubt on this conclusion. It is clear, in fact, in examining the view of life contained in "Loveliest of Trees" that to regard Housman merely as a pessimist is to oversimplify a more complex attitude.

Some other critics, however, find that Housman answers the question of life and death in contradictory ways. *A Shropshire Lad* is based on the human dilemma of life and death, and this dilemma can be resolved only in paradoxical terms. To be fully understood it must be seen in relation to the concern with permanence and change, and innocence and experience, which lies at the heart of the work. In his 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and Earlier Hardy* defends himself against the charge of pessimism. Housman had similar problem and made his own attempts to distance himself from the charge of pessimism. For instance, in his letter to Houston Martin

Housman writes that pessimism is 'silly' and himself is a pejorist as opposed to a meliorist.

It is possible that both these writers would have embraced pessimism, but they did not want to be thought of as people who could only see the dark side of things. They both wanted to make it clear that they had arrived at their positions after due consideration of the evidence; as Housman pointed out in the letter to Houston Martin that he arrived at his pejorism owing to his observation of the world, not to personal circumstances.

The discussion of the theme of soldiering evinces that Housman was greatly fascinated by soldiering and the accidents of military life. The most important source for Housman's compassion for the desperate young soldier was his youngest brother, Herbert. Herbert's battalion took part in the Boar War of 1901, and he was killed in action. The fact of his death inspired writing or re-writing of some of Housman's greatest poetry. In a letter to his sister Kate, he wrote that the essential business of poetry was to harmonize the sadness of the universe. Yet publicly, Housman appeared wholly unmoved by the Great War and cynical about its motives.

Duty, friendship, and bravery are the three public or conventional values that Housman expects to find in a soldier. The

sacrifices made by soldiers in defending their motherland always won his admiration. Military friendship and community is another important characteristic of Housman's poetry. Many of the lyrics lament friendship broken by death, which is the inevitable fate of Housman's soldier. Courage and stoic endurance are the two constant themes of Housman's poetry. In some of the poems, Housman shows the pain and sorrow certainly involved in the act of dying.

The first poem of *A Shropshire Lad*, "1887", and "Epitaph for an Army of Mercenaries" have the same subject matter and caused some controversy in their attitude towards war, religion and patriotism.

The tragedy of unrequited love, a symbol perhaps of his own passionate friendship for Moses Jackson, haunts Housman. In many of his love poems, he treats the theme of a heartless mistress who relents too late. Earlier group of Shropshire poems also depict the varied faces of love: the misery of being unloved at the time of loving, the folly of loving that produces only misery, the lover's suicide, the exchange of innocence for experience, faithlessness, etc. Housman's love lyrics emphasize the awareness that love, like life, is fleeting and transient. The earliest love poem, *ASL V* is

lighthearted in tone in spite of its theme of love's misfortunes. *ASL* VI treats love as an illness. The nature of love is so transitory that if lover's desires are fulfilled, his love is over, and it is the maiden who must "lie down forlorn". *ASL* XIII serves as the introduction to a whole group of poems which depict the true transience of love. The five poems that follow deal in more detail with the various stages of the misery of the lad who fails to heed the wise man's advice and give his heart away. In *ASL* XIV the lover's despair is so strong that probably it can never be removed. A comparatively tragic view of love is depicted in later Shropshire poems. The theme of *ASL* XXI ("Bredon Hill") is the impossibility of permanent love in a world where death is inevitable. The final series of love poems in the Shropshire group (Nos. XXV, XXVI, XXVII) deals with the true pathos of love, for all three poems reveal love's inconstancy by suggesting an endless cycle of lovers forgotten in death and betrayed by the surviving lovers. *ASL* XXVII displays pictures the inconstancy of love with the unrealistic situation of a dead lover speaking from the grave. The poem reveals Housman's use of love as a symbol of change. It deals with two kinds of love — the love of a friend and the love of a sweetheart. But neither of the two is fixed and unchanging.

Some of the poems of Housman seem to have been occasioned either by his separation from his closest friend, Moses Jackson, or by some other emotional experience which Housman wanted to hide from his readers. They are naturally characterized by a strong element of ambiguity. This emotional element of Housman's poetry reminds us of what Tennyson said in *In Memoriam* v. 5—6: 'for the unquiet heart and brain, / A use in measured language lies'. In the same context (v. 1—4) Tennyson, measuring his language, confessed:

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

It was his poetry that offered Housman the medium to 'half reveal / and half conceal the Soul within'. Housman wrote from an urgent personal need to find expression for the inexpressible. They are not for the most part 'biographical' in any straightforward sense. But they have a personal element that cannot be ignored. Housman's unrequited love for Moses Jackson lay at the heart of his emotional life and about which it was impossible to silent remain silent. In fact, Housman's poems have an instinct both for revelation and for concealment.

The next important theme of Housman's poetry is exile. Lyric XXXVII ("As Through the Wild Green Hills of Wyre") establishes the shift in setting from Shropshire to London. The theme of estrangement is established in the first four poems of the exile group, for these four poems, more than any other in *A Shropshire Lad* establishes the contrast between the pastoral existence of Shropshire and the exile in London. The poems now look back westward from London to Shropshire, something living in the memory but beyond recovery.

Many of the poems of *A Shropshire Lad* deal with the pleasures of life at its prime and the pain of its dissolution; others show an unconcern for both its pleasures and its pains. The former mood pervades through the Shropshire poems and the latter, through those poems after the exile. Housman depicts in the latter poems of *A Shropshire Lad* an attitude towards life which has a direct relation to the young man's first discovery of his mortality. *ASL* XXXVII describes the effect of the vanishing of the Shropshire landscape from the sight of Terence as the train carries him to London. Both the loneliness and anxiety of the London poems are also anticipated. In *ASL* XXXVIII, the persona nostalgically looks back to the west, to Shropshire, from which he has now become

estranged. In London, the alien finds himself in a "friendless world." The journey from Shropshire establishes the final break with the world of youth and innocence. The persona has also lost harmony with nature. The three poems which follow bear the same sense of loss and nostalgia because they look back to a land of youth and simplicity. In *ASL XL*, the memories of youth come from "yon far country" of "blue remembered hills." The memories of things past is "an air that kills" and the "land of lost content" is Shropshire. *ASL XLI* "In My Own Shire If I Was Sad," is based on the contrast between the "homely comforters" of the home shire and the "mortal sickness" of London. The picture of men of London, who "hate their fellow man," reflects the hostile world where "homely comforters" are substituted by men who "wish you ill." In *ASL LII* "Far in a Western Brookland," the wind which the wanderer hears in the "windless night-time" is the soul of the lad who has forsaken the land of his youth for a barren existence of London. The prevailing mood of *Last Poems* is similar to that of the second half of *A Shropshire Lad*, where the persona broods over his Shropshire youth from a new viewpoint and experiences both the loss and gain involved in the process of change. This exile group of poems contains the paradoxical notion that it was only the illusion

that made life meaningful. The mature man, in looking into the past, sees that life held a hope and significance for the young man which he no longer finds. The very act of looking into the past destroys the meaning by revealing the illusion. In brief, this group of exile poems of Housman allows us to share, at least temporarily, the sense of what it means to recognize the passing of youth, the movement from one view of life to another, besides a nostalgic feeling for the place, though imaginatively.

Housman is definitely modern in his attitude towards nature. The essential themes in the nature poetry of the 20th century — fear, horror, loneliness, isolation, paradoxes— are all there in his poetry. Wordsworth used to assert that nature never did betray the heart that loved her. But Housman does not agree with it. According to him, nature is ever indifferent to man. Housman, like Frost, believed that the external calm and beauty of nature is highly deceptive. Nor is he, like Wordsworth, a poet who has had a vision in youth which he can spend the rest of his life interpreting. Housman's poems tell us of his daily, and one might say, common experience. His earlier poems manifest his lifelong interest in the contemplation of nature by means of careful observation. In these

poems, contraries— light and darkness, good and evil— are
constantly being set side by side.

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There are numerous essays of bibliographical, biographical and critical interest in the annual volumes of the *Housman Society Journal* from 1974 onwards.

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